

Opinion on the MQF Referencing Report to the EQF and Self-certification to the QF-EHEA

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The aim of the MQF referencing and self-certification report to the EQF and to the QF-EHEA is to verify the compatibility of the MQF with the EQF, and with the QF-EHEA. The report in many details presents the existing education and training system in the country and description of stakeholders' involvement during the development of the MQF. Moreover, the report gives background of the fulfilment and response to the EQF referencing criteria (and to the QF-EHEA criteria and procedures) demonstrating that the MQF is compatible with the EQF, and to the QF-EHEA, with some needs for further development. It presents also challenges and next steps for further improvement of quality and relevance of qualifications system in the country, and deeper involvement of employers and other stakeholders more related to the labour market.

The report is a comprehensive document with many details on the existing educational system, its quality assurance mechanisms, roles and responsibilities of main actors. Various examples and additional relevant documents in annexes in the report or on the websites give additional value and better view on the qualifications system and arrangements of the quality assurance mechanisms.

The report clearly presents three development phases of the MQF:

1. Preparatory phase, which includes the awareness and capacity building on the importance and relevance of development and implementation of NQFs.
2. Developing phase, focusing to development of all concepts, tools, guidelines and legislative for the MQF.
3. Implementation phase.

Relevant stakeholders have been involved in a different ways in the referencing and self-certification processes, including higher education institutions, quality assurance bodies, employers, students, ministries, chambers, education and training centres, etc. Some of them have been deeper involved and some less. Employers and other stakeholders more linked to labour market should be deeper involved in next phases of the development and implementation of the MQF.

Tables, illustrations and examples bring better understanding and, thus, the value of the report.

Glossary of main concepts, bring more transparency and understanding of the qualifications system in the country. Methodology and procedures for qualifications levels have been well described.

The eight levels and additional three sub-levels of the MQF cover the range of qualifications system in the country, from primary education to higher education. Each level is defined by level descriptors of learning outcomes, which are classified in three domains: knowledge and understanding, skills, and competence. Sub-levels, within the same level, have the same level descriptors for all domains, but have different requirements on credit value, representing the volume of qualifications. Thus, sublevels are related to the size of qualifications (number of credits). Sublevels are not related to the complexity of learning outcomes, which are usually in NQFs are presented by level descriptors.

Referencing process of the MQF to the EQF has been guided by the Core Group under the Ministry of Education and Science, with the aim to ensure fulfilment of referencing and self-certification criteria and procedures.

For the current time, the MQF is a reforming and communicative framework, giving a platform for better understanding interests of different stakeholders and facilitating implementation of learning outcomes, modernisation of quality assurance, validation of non-formal and informal learning, and other related concepts.

The report presents the aim of the MQF, which includes step-by-step process of creating a coherent and comprehensive system of classification of all qualifications, independently on the way of achievements (formal, non-formal and informal).

The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for developing and implementing the MQF and for referencing and self-certificating it to the EQF and QF-EHEA.

The report includes seven main chapters (Description of the National qualifications system; Referencing and self-certification processes; National Qualifications Framework; Response to the EQF referencing criteria and to QF-EHEA self-certification criteria and procedures; Brief description of validation of non-formal and informal learning; and Challenges and next steps. In addition there are chapters on Glossary; Acronyms; References and Annexes).

The qualifications system has been described in details. The chapter is very well organised and structured. It includes description of:

- Formal educational and training system: Preschool education, Primary education, Secondary education (Gymnasium, Vocational, Secondary art, Secondary for students with special education needs, etc.); Post-secondary education; Higher education;
- Adult learning, and
- Recognition of foreign qualifications.

All parts of the qualifications system are explained using the same structure of the text, giving information on:

- Detailed general description;
- Legal framework;
- Strategies and other documents;
- Governance;
- Learning outcomes implementation;
- Quality assurance mechanisms;
- And very helpful summative table for each part of the qualifications system (Entry requirements; Education and training provision; Financing, Teachers qualifications; Expected learning outcomes; Assessment and awards; Progression routes; Labour market, and Quality assurance mechanisms).

As it is described in the report, formal education comprises of pre-school education (age between 0 and 6), primary education (3 times 3 years duration), secondary education (various programmes, gymnasium, vocational, art education, and education for students with special educational needs), post-secondary (specialized education and master exam), and higher education (with two profiles, and short and three cycles).

The report shows many details and characteristics of the education system – general and specific elements of subsystems, including descriptions of quality assurance, learning outcomes implementation and issues, teacher qualifications, etc.

Higher education is described as a system solely provided by autonomous institutions under public law, comprising of two profiles: academic and professional studies. Doctoral studies (qualifications at the eight level) are organised only as an academic strand at universities.

The quality assurance of higher education is conducted through the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board. The quality assurance body for quality assurance in higher education is an associate member of the ENQA, and the roadmap has been prepared for a full membership in ENQA and EQAR. To become a member of the EQAR, which is crucial for the implementation of the Bologna Process, there is a need for further preparation of the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board according to the ESG, including its full independent work.

Further, the report presents detailed phases during the design and implementation of the MQF. The consultation that has been undertaken in the process has been extensive, involving all key stakeholders and building ownership of the framework to ensure later better implementation. The work has been very extensive and detailed, from the decision, defining objectives and outcomes, organisation of the work, consultation with stakeholders up to the referencing and self-certification, and implementation. More intensive involvement of employers should happened within the next phases.

Last couple of years, the work on development and implementation of the MQF has been extensively presented in the country and internationally, making the process transparent to all stakeholders and partners.

Fulfilment of all EQF and QF-EHEA criteria and procedures has been presented in details:

- Criterion 1, the main actors are the Ministry of Education and Science, with the Working Group consisted of representatives from: the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Centre for Adult Learning, VET Centre, Bureau for Development of Education, Employment Service Agency, State Statistical Office, Ministry of Information Society and Public Administration, Chamber of Commerce, Organisation of Employers and Chamber of Crafts. The NQF Law applies as of 30 September 2015, and according to the Law, the Government has established the National Board for the MQF.
- Criterion 2, the link between qualifications levels (and sub-levels) of the MQF and the level descriptors of the EQF and their comparison, from 1 to 8, have been transparently presented. Sub-levels are not defined by level descriptors, but only by requirements on number of credits. This means that sub-levels are more related to types of qualifications and less to the complexity of their learning outcomes.
- Criterion 3, it is clear that the MQF is based on learning outcomes, which is a significant change in current education practice in the country (as it is similar in many countries in the EU). It means that the role of the MQF includes reform of qualifications system, with a focus to the implementation of learning outcomes and quality assurance mechanisms, based on common principles. The aim of the MQF is also to develop validation of non-formal and informal learning. ECTS credit system is used in the higher education system, and ECVET is planned. Additional national credit system for general education has been also envisaged. Some of the qualifications and sectors need further steps regarding the implementation of learning outcomes, which is envisaged within the next phase of the implementation of the MQF.
- Criterion 4, the inclusion of qualifications in the MQF has been piloted extensively, and presented in the report in very details. Further steps have been prepared, including development of the common Register of qualifications.
- Criterion 5, in the national qualifications system there are quality assurance systems for: primary and secondary education (general/ VET/ art) and for higher education. They are

regulated by the national legislations. All sub-systems have internal and external parts of quality assurance. There are external quality assurance bodies: State Education Inspectorate, Bureau for Development of Education, VET Centre, and the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board. Within the next phases of the implementation of the MQF, the work of quality assurance bodies should be organised more according to common principles of the quality assurance, which is envisaged.

- Criterion 6, the quality assurance bodies have been involved in the process, and agreed to the referencing process and report. Their statements are presented.
- Criterion 7, international experts from different sectors and countries have been included – higher education and VET, developed and developing countries, advisory group member, and more and less familiar with the qualifications system.
- Criterion 8, the report has been certified by relevant national bodies (the Ministry of Education and Science). It is stated that the report will be published on the official website: www.mrk.mk.
- Criterion 9, the report has been submitted to the Advisory group and, as planned, will be presented in February 2015.
- Criterion 10, it has stated that the classification of new qualifications will contain a clear reference to the MQF and EQF level.

Fulfilment of the QF-EHEA criteria and procedures has been also presented in a separate chapter.

There are several challenges presented, such as: further harmonisation of existing legislations with the NQF Law, further capacity building, introduction of ECVET system, strengthening the quality assurance system, development of the Register of qualifications and validation of non-formal and informal learning. All those are well presented and planned for next steps of the development and implementation of the MQF

As a concluding, the Referencing and self-certification report of the MQF is a comprehensive report. The report presents the existing education system in the country, including arrangements of quality assurance and learning outcomes implementation. Moreover, the report gives detailed and clear background of the fulfilment and response to the EQF and QF-EHEA criteria and procedures, demonstrating that the MQF is compatible with the EQF and QF-EHEA. As in some of other countries in the EU, further improvement of quality assurance system, according to common principles is planned, have been prepared and presented transparently in the report.

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