

# STRATEGIC PROJECT QUALIFICATIONS AND QUALIFICATION SYSTEMS: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN - WP2018

## 1. Summary

The Strategic Project on Qualifications and Qualification Systems (SP Q) seeks to achieve three results: modernization of partner country qualification systems; application in the countries of the ETF's advice in developing reform strategies and instruments; and compatibility between and linking of partner countries' NQFs and the EQF.

To deliver Result One, we advise and guide partner country actors in modernizing their qualification systems to produce relevant and quality qualifications; and build capacity of national institutions in qualification system reform so that they can drive forward reform independently. In essence we try to make NQFs work, by addressing the core common elements of legislation, stakeholders, institutions and quality assurance. We advise on proportionate legislation, functions and roles of institutions, how to facilitate stakeholder engagement and decision-taking, and on application of quality assurance tools and systems; and developing supporting tools and methodologies such as qualifications inventories, databases, handbooks and levelling methods. Through our EU Support function, we steer NQF projects in the countries, via content and methodological advice.

Result Two is essentially about communicating and influencing policy in the ETF, the countries, the EU, and internationally by disseminating our knowledge and advice via our Qualifications Platform, publications, regional and corporate conferences and peer-learning seminars, and participation in international network events, the EQF Advisory Group and the development of ETF tools and briefings.

Result Three concerns referencing the SEET countries' NQFs to the EQF, and increasing compatibility between, and comparison of, third partner countries' NQFs to the EQF, to facilitate recognition of qualifications and legal migration. For SEET countries, the ETF advises on meeting the EQF referencing criteria, provides capacity-building support to their participation in the Advisory Group; for neighbourhood countries, the ETF advises on achieving NQFs which adhere to EQF principles, structures and comparability criteria.

Internally, we develop our expertise through country experience, work on our toolkits and studies, and internal knowledge-sharing sessions on sub-themes such as EQF referencing or levelling methodologies.

## 2. Progress to date and lessons learnt

To assess country needs and shape individual country interventions, SP Q applies three tools: the NQF Inventory, which monitors in detail countries' progress in developing their NQFs against common

criteria; the policy stage indicators, which signal broad stages of development; and a planning and monitoring tool, Context-Mechanism Outcome. The NQF Inventory records progress in those countries developing an NQF – SPQ gathers data from the local authorities. Next, the policy stage provide descriptors and indicators, which SPQ uses to categorise a country's progress. Then, SPQ uses this data and classification to inform the CMOs; the CMOs result in a logic of actions, outputs, and required resources, which contribute to achieving the intended outcomes in the country. EU progress reports, Country Desk intelligence and EU Delegations provide information.

Our experience of developing toolkits and other publications also enables us to develop our expertise and formulate our approaches to our country work.

The ETF has advised countries on NQF legislation and most now have NQF laws or decrees. We have also supported drafting of implementation plans, advised on institutional roles and functions, and introduction of quality assurance tools, including criteria for design and content of qualifications. We have facilitated establishment of stakeholder dialogue platforms, if not always permanently, in some countries. The more advanced countries such as Montenegro, Kosovo<sup>1</sup>, Turkey, and Georgia, with our support, have adopted methodologies for vetting qualifications to enter national registers, placed outcomes qualifications in their frameworks, and begun assessing and certifying candidates via validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL).

The ETF has also cooperated with partner country technical experts to produce implementation tools and methodologies such as Albania's NQF handbook, qualifications inventories in most of the SEET countries, levelling methodologies e.g. in FYROM and Morocco; a systemic review of qualification systems in Ukraine and Belarus and instruments to review and support the development of occupational standards, qualification standards, educational standards and curricula in Eastern European countries.

Our Qualifications Platform disseminates intelligence on developments in our field to more than 800 members in the English language platform and almost 200 members in the Russian language platform; a network of 12 partner country experts publishes blogs and material on their respective countries. Our publications, especially our latest toolkit, are widely used by partner country stakeholders to inform their policies, for example in national workshops and are available in several languages.

We have supported FYROM, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Turkey, via capacity-building actions and technical advice, to achieve successful referencing of their NQFs to the EQF.

The ETF is a recognised authority in qualification systems, especially in transition societies. We co-produce, biennially, with Cedefop and UNESCO, the Global NQF Inventory. We collaborate with UNESCO, EU country and other governments in developing the World Reference Levels. Our toolkits and other publications, and our regular corporate conferences, have likewise established us as a player in the qualifications field globally.

The chief obstacles to reform are partly technical, but more often institutional: lack of capacity, conflicting policy priorities etc. or broader political issues. In Tunisia, implementation of the NQF was delayed for years due to lack of stakeholder engagement. In 2017, institutional upheaval delayed progress in Morocco. In Albania, implementation of the NQF has been halted for a period by a political crisis which resulted in dissolution of the lead ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence – hereinafter "Kosovo".

An external evaluation conducted in 2014 of the ETF's work in qualifications systems found that our most effective formula was country-specific interventions combined with regional and corporate peer-learning e.g. via events, plus development of studies and toolkits to disseminate our advice and recommendations. ETF expertise was considered useful and of high quality but interventions were sometimes considered ad-hoc. Indeed, this is an area we continue to try to rectify by more coherent planning, budget allocations, and follow-up of technical interventions.

The 2016 corporate external evaluation confirmed that the Qualifications Platform, regional and corporate events and publications, facilitated knowledge-sharing among partner country experts and other actors. It also reported partner countries had a favourable view of the ETF's interventions in the qualifications field, in particular in application of learning outcomes and development of NQFs, where the ETF was considered a significant driver of change. This latter report also noted greater progress in NQF implementation in SEET and EE relative to SEMED.

### 3. New opportunities, challenges and risks

In countries where progress in system implementation is visible and sustainable, we should seek to turn our focus to ensuring benefits of outcomes approaches reach people, learners, teachers, employers alike.

Emerging country priorities include VNFIL systems to assess and certify returning migrants and adult learners, applicable in all SEET countries and most of Eastern Europe. In the more advanced NQFs, levelling methodologies and associated tools such as registers; the application in curricula, learning and teaching of outcomes approaches and related methods and tools to bring benefits to people, such as communication and navigation tools and guidance are priority concerns for us. Some new EU projects now underway, including new initiatives in Azerbaijan and Belarus, offer us scope to influence or shape the emerging NQFs on the lifelong learning and system-wide principles we advocate.

Three principal policy areas influence the ETF in VET: the ten political priorities, Education and Training 2020 and the Copenhagen Process. In our field, from the ten priorities, the Skills Agenda has a direct bearing on our partner countries. It prioritises making qualifications and skills visible via the revised EQF Recommendation, adopted in May 2017, which includes future scope for third countries to compare their NQFs to the EQF; and also through the Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals, which will assist EU country services in to identify skills and qualifications of newly-arrived third-country citizens.

The ETF's technical work and policy advice in the partner countries supports both these instruments. Our programme is intended to ensure sustainable, quality, modern qualification systems, that can in future be linked to the EQF and which, above all, deliver relevant, lifelong learning, qualifications to partner country citizens. Both tools will, beyond modernizing domestic systems, inform legal migration. We will participate in the UNESCO-led World Reference Levels groups as its deliberations and decisions will affect future technical development of our countries' NQFs.

The principal risk is that qualification system reforms require a lot of time before the benefits are visible, and the sometimes slow progress of NQFs might cause countries to give them a lower priority. However, the Torino Process 2017 reports indicated NQFs remain high priorities, especially in SEET and Eastern Europe.

### 4. Key priorities for 2018

Interventions which directly benefit the citizens will be a major focus in 2018. At country level, this will be most visible through validation of non-formal learning (VNFIL), which will intensify in Kosovo, FYROM, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Moldavia, and Ukraine; and in levelling qualifications – so that qualifications are actually available to citizens for their use e.g. in Morocco.

Our planned draft publication for 2018 is a toolkit on this theme. Provisionally titled “Qualifications and Skills: Benefits to People”, its themes will include how countries link qualifications to learning processes, covering teaching, curricula, communication and information tools such as websites and counselling and guidance services. We will also address higher education to VET links via a shared seminar with the Council of Europe on level 5 qualifications.

In a few cases, progress of our interventions is unpredictable. We will re-evaluate the shape of our interventions where institutional uncertainty prevents our progress.

We need to develop our expertise in and delivering benefits to people, which we highlight above as an opportunity area. We plan two internal ETF seminars, one of which will address themes and information needs for the toolkit. We will consult, in designing and conceptualizing our toolkit, other SPs.

Communication is key to ensuring that ETF activities are delivered and have an impact. In order to engage with partner countries we need to have effective digital tools and methods. Our web-based application has been used to disseminate our new Toolkit “Getting Organized” and customizable self-assessment tools. Such digital tools, adapted to the needs of the target audiences, will help partner countries to be more engaged in their expertise development (capacity-building) and will help the ETF to shape our interventions better matched to PC needs. During 2018, we also plan to begin work on making the Qualifications Platform easier to use, including via a new technical platform, principally to enhance its accessibility and ease of use.

## 5. Expected Outcomes 2018

In SEET, we will advise countries to address their implementation gaps, e.g. in Albania, advising on populating the NQF with qualifications and providing inputs to secondary legislation, so that more qualifications are available; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we will facilitate analysis and decision-making on the VNFIL system, producing a draft implementation strategy; in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo, we will deepen VNFIL implementation via piloting and producing handbooks and methodologies for dissemination, so that validation is applied and learners use these pathways to obtain qualifications. In Turkey, we concentrate on guiding authorities in piloting levelling methodologies, so that more qualifications go more quickly into the framework. In Serbia, our role will change from in-depth technical work and steering of technical groups to add value to the new IPA Sector Budget Support programme, by analysing and commenting on strategic documents and draft legislation and EQF referencing documents.

In the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, our engagement in Tunisia is via an EU project, where we will advise on strategic planning. In Morocco, we anticipate supporting increased levelling of qualifications in the register and NQF.

In Eastern Europe, in Ukraine, we will offer strategic guidance, including monitoring the NQF Action Plan; advise on legislation and produce methodologies to develop standards and curricula and facilitate production of supporting tools such as handbooks and the NQF website and Register. We will provide policy and technical advice for the establishment of the National Qualifications Agency. Our support will build on the changes introduced in the new Law on Education and lays the foundations for the future EU project. In Azerbaijan, we will ensure the outputs of the VET Reform and NQF Technical Assistance projects are fit for purpose, and produce guidelines to develop and use occupational standards, so that qualifications are more relevant. In Belarus, we will produce regular detailed recommendations and comments to support implementation of the EU project’s NQF component, contributing to the quality in particular of legislation, levelling methodologies, and governance aspects such as sector committees. In the Republic of Moldova, we will advise on integration of the current HE and VET components of the NQF, resulting in progress to a consolidated NQF which is lifelong

learning in scope. In Georgia, we will guide authorities in producing a new NQF Handbook, leading to greater stakeholder awareness and a shared understanding among actors of the aims and uses of the NQF and how it can be implemented.

In Central Asia, we will use virtual means to disseminate our expertise, to address specific queries from Central Asia. This includes blogs on the QP, regular Skype meetings, including with actors in the Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP), plus two webinars, called Question Time Central Asia. Intelligence on progress of qualification reforms in Central Asia gathered via these means will be published on the QP.

Our support to EU projects consists of inputs to programming, as in Kosovo; advice to EU Delegations and national authorities in Georgia and Morocco on NQF Twinning Fiches; producing recommendations to the Delegation and EU project in Turkey on implementing the Foundation of VocTest Centres. In Azerbaijan, we will monitor the two EU projects in VET and the NQF, producing briefs for the Delegation on progress; similarly, in Belarus, we will monitor the EU project on Employment and VET, producing a monitoring plan. More general support encompasses comments on technical documents, contributions such as presentations or facilitating at workshops; as in Serbia and in Belarus; and analysis of the ETF role relative to potential engagement of international donors in all countries where we work with EU projects.

In implementing EU policies, the new Council Recommendation on the EQF, adopted in May 2017, allows for third countries, including ETF partner countries, to request comparison with the EQF. In those countries with Association Agreements or Mobility partnerships with the EU and EU countries, e.g. Morocco, Ukraine, Moldova, and which encompass NQFs, we will ensure NQF development is compatible with the evolving EQF, in preparation for future linking to the EQF. We will seek to ensure this objective via support to development of characteristics, systems and instruments established in the EQF and applied in the Member States, such as lifelong learning, quality assurance and stakeholder platforms and VNFIL. We will support Bosnia and Herzegovina, an EQF Advisory Group member, in early preparations for referencing, expected for after 2018. We will report to the Commission on progress in NQF implementation of our five partner countries participating in the Riga Process and against the Economic Reform Programme.

We will contribute to expertise development and international debate in 2018 via publications, participation in international expert groups and events.

The ETF in 2018 will make its annual update to our NQF Inventory country chapters – these will be shared with partner country actors for validation and dissemination. These country chapter updates will contribute accurate content and analysis to international discussions on NQFs. We will also begin planning for publication in 2019 of the fourth edition of the Global NQF Inventory, co-produced with Cedefop and UNESCO, which combines the above country chapters with thematic chapters authored by the respective international institutions.

A critical area in most countries' NQF implementation is integrating HE and VET qualifications levels, building pathways between the two. Level 5 is a bridging level, since qualifications are commonly awarded at that level in HE, VET and other sub-sectors. We will organise a peer-learning event on level 5 qualifications, engaging the Council of Europe in devising the programme. Our event will develop expertise and increase knowledge of this issue among participating experts; we will disseminate its findings and apply in our partner country work.

Our new toolkit, "Qualifications and Skills, Benefits to People", focuses on where people actually encounter qualifications, via teaching and learning, curricula (including key competences), guidance, and communication tools. We look at how employers and businesses use qualifications, and how authorities and providers communicate with them. We will identify current practice and reality, identify

and summarise what works, and develop some draft recommendations to partner countries on how to realise qualification systems linked to and serving individuals.

## 6. Actions and outputs for 2018 (including stakeholder cooperation)

Five actions which represent key milestones for SP Q in 2018 are:

- Production of methodologies, guides and tools in individual partner countries in levelling of qualifications.
- Implementation of VNFIL systems in SEET, including linking to NQF implementation, production of guidance tools, training, piloting of methods for specified qualifications and dissemination; and provision of VNFIL chapters for Cedefop inventory.
- In Ukraine, where we are engaging intensively to support authorities before the new EU programme support is applied, policy advice, implementation plan with indicators, VET standards and draft plan and regulations for the new Qualifications Agency.
- Recommendations, comments, guidance, facilitation support etc. to EU Delegations and national authorities in countries where EU projects contain an NQF component.
- A draft version of our new toolkit “Qualifications and skills – Benefits to People”, which will guide partner countries on how to ensure qualifications link with curricula, that they reach the public and employers, how they can be used and what their benefits are.

Clearly, development of the toolkit draft requires cooperation and sharing of expertise and material with colleagues in SPs GOV, PROV, EMPL and EL. In EU project support, we will need to liaise with SP EU Support; thematically, interventions in Moldova on institutional arrangements, and Azerbaijan on occupational standards, will be coordinated with SP GOV and EMPL respectively.

In 2018, we will participate in the EQF Advisory Group; here we track the Recommendation’s progress. While the new Recommendation provides for third country comparison of NQFs to the EQF, in 2018, this will not be a priority in implementation for the Commission. We broadly relay updates to partner countries. This is essentially information-sharing.

We will continue the regular ETF-Cedefop dialogue in particular at our knowledge-sharing seminars; plus development of the Global NQF Inventory and cooperation in reporting on SEET countries for the Cedefop VNFIL Inventory. These are under the categories of expertise-sharing and joint activities.

Our event on Level 5 qualifications, developed with Council of Europe, referred to in previous sections, will guide and inform our partner countries on the HE dimension and bridging to VET. This event would come under both information-sharing and expertise-sharing.

We will continue our contribution as a member of the working group developing the World Reference Levels. This group, chaired by UNESCO, aims to develop a set of global reference levels to compare VET qualifications and capture learning achievement. It comprises the UN, the EU, and regional and national QF authority representatives from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Pacific. 2018 will see field-testing, which the ETF will comment and advise on. Our concern will be to ensure transition societies’ specificities are accounted for in the WRLs design. Our participation is about information-sharing and sharing methodologies and expertise.

We also work with UNESCO on the above-mentioned Global NQF Inventory, of which they are co-authors with Cedefop and ourselves.

## 7. Knowledge Management, Communication and Dissemination

We plan two internal seminars for ETF staff – one on our planned new toolkit on benefits to people, the second on our work in Ukraine. On the toolkit, this event will have several purposes, including awareness-raising among staff in OPS and scoping the toolkit. We wish to alert experts and country desks to our plans, inform them of our data needs from them; and identify and agree the main themes to be covered. So this seminar, to be conducted early in 2018, will contribute to the toolkit. Our second seminar, to take place autumn 2018, will cover Ukraine, where our commitment during 2017 and 2018 will have been especially intense. We are preparing the country for an eventual EU project, and so are guiding decision-makers there on strategy in qualification system development, including planning tools, technical advice on methodologies and tools, plus focusing on communication tools to promote awareness of the NQF.

Our Qualifications Platform will continue. We maintain our correspondents' network for country reporting but reinforce it with a better planning tool. The correspondents will be trained in the relevant subject, if required, to empower them to use the Platform on a longer-term basis. The QP will also be used to disseminate information on the regional and corporate events. We will continue also disseminating the e-toolkit; this was developed in 2016 and has been widely implemented, in all ETF regions in 2017, including at seminars. We will make some modifications and facilitate translations by interested partner countries.

We will begin planning the communication and dissemination strategy, closely cooperating with our Communications Department, for the new toolkit.

We cannot physically be everywhere, given the already long list of countries we work bilaterally with, so in Central Asia we will provide two seminars virtually, consisting of question and answer sessions for actors and stakeholders. We have a successful formula developed during 2017 and will apply this again in 2018, updating themes for the seminars.

## 8. Monitoring and Evaluation

There are three levels of monitoring and evaluation relevant to SPQ: external, ETF corporate and SPQ's own recording, monitoring and assessment.

During 2018 our work in the partner countries and its impacts will not be externally evaluated, but we need to prepare for the 2019 evaluation, including agreeing purposes, scope, methodology, cases, and what outputs or new tools for future use we want. These discussions will be held first within SP Q, then with ETF colleagues, then agreed with the external evaluators, including meeting the team which will conduct the 2019 evaluation, to agree the Terms of Reference.

For our 2017 work, there are the corporate tools, plus those we in SP Q have developed and use to monitor, record, report and evaluate country progress. Corporate tools are the country progress indicators (CPIs) used also in the Torino Process reporting, plus the indicators set against the three SP Q Outcomes which appear in the Programming Document 2017-20. These are:

| Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                  | Indicators                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lifelong learning qualifications systems have progressed and skills and knowledge of partner country institutions and stakeholders developed.                             | Partner countries make progress within, or to next, policy development stage.                                                                                                |
| Evidence based-policy and international policy discussions, moderated by the ETF, inform partner country reforms of qualifications systems.                               | Application of outcomes and wider lifelong learning principles in qualification systems; recorded in NQF Inventory country chapters                                          |
| Candidate and potential candidate countries make progress towards referencing their NQFs to the EQF. External dimension of EQF implemented in relevant partner countries. | Measures for transparency, quality, labour market relevance and portability of qualifications, and compatibility with EQF, implemented by partner countries developing NQFs. |

The CPIs try to capture country progress in defined elements of qualification systems, namely legislation, institutions, stakeholder engagement, learning outcomes in qualifications and quality assurance.

The CPIs are themselves derived from the SPQ-developed tools. These are: the NQF policy stage indicators, the NQF Inventory and the specific country-planning and monitoring tool, the Context Mechanism Outcomes (CMO).

SPQ uses the policy stage indicators to locate a partner country at one stage in the evolution of an NQF, then assesses progress within, or to the next stage. A critical source of evidence for this placing is the NQF Inventory, which records country state of play and progress against common criteria. These criteria include policy context, NQF objectives, legislation, stakeholder engagement, institutional arrangements, quality assurance, establishment of VNFIL systems, use of learning outcomes, range of qualifications available and supporting tools such as registers. To keep these chapters up to date, SPQ draws on its own ETF expert contact and observation in the respective country, engagement with partner country colleagues, and their validation.

The CMO we use to plan and monitor interventions. It places NQF development in a given partner country in wider VET and economic development contexts, identifies ETF interventions and sets out outcomes or effects in the country, and describes outputs and products e.g. recommendations, methodologies, and tools.

In 2018, in Azerbaijan and Belarus, we will support the EU delegations in Baku and Minsk in the monitoring and evaluation of EU projects - technical assistance projects for the NQF and VET in Baku; and a technical assistance project for Employment and VET in Minsk. These follow evaluations we conducted in 2017 in Ukraine on competency-based educational standards and on the development and use of occupational standards in Azerbaijan. This evaluation work is participatory and involves national stakeholders and other donors.