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Directorate-General for Education and Culture

Europe 2020: Policy development and country analysis
Skills and qualifications strategies; Multilingualism Policy

Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications

Background document

The continuing difficulties surrounding the recognition and transparency of skills and qualifications hinder the development of the right mix of skills and qualifications as well as the mobility needed to achieve a better match between skills and jobs to help boost competitiveness and prosperity. The European Commission wishes to collect the views of stakeholders on the problems faced by learners and workers with regard to the transparency and recognition of their skills and qualifications when moving within and between EU Member States, on the adequacy of the related European policies and instruments and on the potential benefits of developing a “European area of skills and Qualifications”.

INTRODUCTION

When moving to a new job or to further learning, whether within or across borders, learners and workers need to see their skills and qualifications quickly and easily recognised. This is essential to raise skill levels, help combat unemployment and complete the project of the single market.

Due to rapid economic and technological changes, the traditional school-work-retirement pattern is no longer the norm. Today’s reality sees individuals go through several transitions within their lifetime, in their country of origin or abroad, including periods of going from work back to education, being in work and education simultaneously or volunteering.

New developments have also dramatically increased learning opportunities. Open technologies have the potential to allow individuals to learn, anywhere, anytime, through any device, with the support of anyone¹. The emergence of innovative models for teaching and learning, (see for example Massive Open Online Courses - MOOCs), is likely to transform the delivery of education and create new competition and centres of excellence worldwide. The internationalisation of education, either because potential students are more mobile or because foreign education and training providers open branches and offer services in other countries (physically and/or online), has further contributed to the broadening of the educational offer.

¹ [Opening up Education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new Technologies and Open Educational Resources COM \(2013\) 654 final](#)

Such a wide and diversified supply of learning opportunities has the potential to accommodate the skills needs of an increasingly complex and knowledge-intensive society, which calls for higher skill levels as well as for transversal skills, such as digital, language and entrepreneurial competences. Forecasts² show that in 2025 44.1% of employed people in the EU will be in a highly and 44.7% in a medium-skilled job and that only 11.2% of jobs are expected to be of an elementary nature. Moreover, a recent OECD-EU survey (PIAAC)³ showed that not only do higher and more relevant skills increase employability, but they also have an impact on wider life prospects, such as better health, longer life expectancy and more active participation in societal life.

While the afore-mentioned trends can be seen as opportunities, they also raise and emphasise challenges related to the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications.

During the last decades several European initiatives⁴ were put in place promoting the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications and mobility as well as skills development (see annex I for an overview). Despite these initiatives, implementation has been slow and bottlenecks still exist:

- Mobility is hampered in its different aspects: geographical, sectoral and between the different sectors of education and training. For example, individuals face problems in finding information that is relevant for learning and job-related mobility, or credits acquired in one educational establishment are not always recognised by other educational establishments (whether this concerns general, vocational or higher education), qualifications are not always understood and recognised abroad. The persistence of these obstacles is even more worrying considering that the current high unemployment rate (10.9%⁵), especially among young people (23%⁶), coexists with over 2 million vacancies that cannot be filled⁷, reflecting a problem of skills-mismatching across Europe.
- The acquisition of skills also remains an issue. The PIAAC survey showed that 20% of the EU working age population has low literacy and numeracy skills and that 25% of adults lack the digital skills needed to effectively use ICT. The survey also found significant differences in the skill levels between individuals with similar qualifications across member countries and highlighted a "low skills trap" for people with low proficiency, as they are less likely to participate in learning activities.
- Whereas digital technologies broaden the offer of educational content, the quality of the learning opportunities offered online is varied and there are currently no clear and commonly accepted procedures to assess or recognise the related learning outcomes, also due to the open and cross-border nature of online learning.

² Cedefop, *Roads to recovery: three skill and labour market scenarios for 2025*, Briefing Note, June 2013. The data refer to the baseline scenario.

³ *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), October 2013*. The survey was carried out in 17 EU Member States, representing 83% of the EU28 population.

⁴ These include initiatives that have been developed at EU level, but also initiatives developed by the Council of Europe as it will be specified further in the note.

⁵ Eurostat, the data refer to the EU-28 in August 2013.

⁶ Eurostat, the data refer to the EU-28 in 2012.

⁷ European vacancy Monitor, September 2013.

- Similarly, the opportunities offered by education providers acting on a global scale raise a number of issues related to the recognition of these international qualifications⁸.

Against these bottlenecks and a backdrop of modest economic recovery, high unemployment levels and broader depressed social situation⁹, European policies and tools for transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications are urgently called to play their role to support growth and competitiveness, tackle unemployment and promote social inclusion. Speeding up implementation of these policies and tools - and where necessary, revisiting their features - can help make them fit for supporting the opportunities offered by technological development and internationalisation. In order to do so, EU policies and instruments should:

- be coherent and centred on the learner, promoting flexible learning pathways,
- support new phenomena such as the growing use of digital learning and internationalisation of education,
- provide better services to learners and workers,
- be simpler, better understandable and more coherent, and
- support national structural reforms that aim to achieve these objectives.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Through this public consultation the Commission wishes to explore the extent and nature of the current obstacles to the recognition and transparency of skills and qualifications across Europe, possible solutions and the potential value added of EU action in the current and future economic and technological context. The consultation addresses in particular the following issues:

1. How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills
2. Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market
3. Adapting to internationalisation trends
4. Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach
5. Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning
6. Increasing the focus on quality assurance
7. Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications.

Further background information on European tools and policies is available in the Annex.

⁸ For the purpose of this consultation, the locution "international qualifications" is intended in a broad sense, meaning qualifications which are awarded jointly by higher education institutions residing in different countries as well as qualifications that are awarded by international private providers, international sectoral organisations and multinational companies.

⁹ [Annual Growth Survey 2014, COM \(2013\) 800 final](#).

Stakeholders and individuals can provide their feedback via the [online questionnaire](#) which contains both open and closed questions. Respondents are free to choose to reply only to some of the proposed questions and focus on particular issues, according to their interests. Stakeholders are also invited to submit position papers to better illustrate their views in relation to the broader objectives of the initiative outlined above¹⁰, either by uploading the file at the end of the online questionnaire or by sending it to the contact details indicated in the [consultation page](#).

The results of the public consultation will feed into a possible Communication that the Commission may launch in 2015, followed by possible revisions of existing European instruments for the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications.

ISSUES FOR THE CONSULTATION: OBSTACLES TO TRANSPARENCY AND RECOGNITION OF SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS.

1. How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills

As noted in the Commission Communication on Rethinking Education¹¹, European education and training systems fall short in providing the right skills for employability.

With respect to progress in promoting the key competences set out in the 2006 European Parliament and Council Recommendation¹² - crucial for both employment and social inclusion - results are disappointing. For example, the share of 15 years olds in Europe that are low achievers in reading is almost 18%, while in mathematics is over 22%¹³. Concerning digital competences, studies show that, on average, only 30% of students in the EU can be considered digitally competent¹⁴. With respect to language skills, only 42% of 15 year olds can use one foreign language in an independent manner and 14% of this age group's competence does not even reach a basic level¹⁵. Finally, according to a recent Eurobarometer survey, 48% of EU respondents felt that their school education had not helped them to develop a sense of initiative and or entrepreneurial attitude¹⁶.

¹⁰ The present consultation does not address the specific features of the revised Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications and the EURES reform for which specific consultations and studies were conducted in the past or are being currently conducted.

¹¹ COM (2012) 669 final.

¹² Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC).

¹³ OECD [Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) 2012](#): It should be noted however that the situation in Member States is uneven. For example, in reading seven countries have reached the EU benchmark of less than 15% (EE, IE, PL, FI, NL, DE, and DK), while in some countries, the proportion of low achievers went up in comparison to their 2009 level to a significant degree (SK, SE and FI). Concerning mathematics, four EU Member States (EE, FI, PL, NL) are among the top performing countries considered in the survey with a rate of low achievers below the EU benchmark of 15%.

¹⁴ COM(2013) 654 final

¹⁵ SWD(2012) 372 final

¹⁶ [Flash Eurobarometer Entrepreneurship Education no.354](#)

As shown by the recent PIAAC survey, the skills landscape for adults is not very different. One in five European adults has only basic skills in literacy, one in four has basic numeracy skills and lacks the skills to effectively make use of ICT. This further stresses the need for lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways, which – at any point in time – would enable individuals to update and upgrade their skills.

Apart from the key competences, other skills warranting urgent attention are, among others, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related skills, transversal skills such as the ability to think critically, take initiative and work collaboratively, and skills related to sectors with growth potential such as ICT, the green economy, health and care sectors and the maritime economy¹⁷.

In order to contribute more effectively to individuals' employability, personal and social development and active citizenship, education and training systems should focus on delivering up-to-date and relevant knowledge, skills and competences. The aforementioned PIAAC survey uncovered significant differences in the skills levels of individuals with similar educational qualifications across the 17 Member States included in the study, confirming that the number of years spent in education or training is not necessarily a good predictor of the level of proficiency achieved.

Curriculum design and assessment of educational attainments fall strictly under the competence of Member States. To help Member States and educational institutions enhance the focus on learning outcomes, should they so wish, European reference frameworks, following the example of the language competence framework¹⁸, could set out the learning outcomes for each level of a specific competence. This could in the first instance be developed for key competences and be then extended to other relevant competences.

The Commission wishes to know stakeholders' opinions on how transparency instruments can support education and training systems to place greater focus on skills and associated learning outcomes (see section 1 of questionnaire).

2. Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market

High levels of unemployment in Europe coexist with skills bottlenecks and mismatches, with certain regions or sectors lacking employees who fit their needs. Modernising education and training systems will help raise skill levels and also boost the transversal skills requested by labour markets, such as digital, language and entrepreneurial competences.

Exchange of information between the world of education and the labour market could be improved in most countries. Obstacles are often related to the lack of a common language (on knowledge, skills and competences) between the two worlds, lack of a clear strategy on how to use information on skills supply and needs for near and medium-term future and lack of a forum for exchange. Several tools with different stages of development (e.g. European

¹⁷ COM (2012) 669 final.

¹⁸ The [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) was developed by the Council of Europe. The European Council, with its Resolution of 14 February 2002 (2002/C 50/01), invited Member States "to set up systems of validation of competence in language knowledge based on the common European framework of reference for languages developed by the Council of Europe, taking sufficient account of skills acquired through informal learning".

Qualifications Framework¹⁹, the recently launched ESCO²⁰, the European Skills Panorama²¹) address this challenge, but are not yet fully implemented.

The Council Resolution of 2008²² confirmed the importance of lifelong guidance in enabling individuals at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competencies and interests and to make educational, training and occupational decisions. However, progress in Member States is uneven with regard to the integration of guidance in their national lifelong learning and employment strategies and policies²³.

The recently revised Directive on professional qualifications²⁴, which supports smooth recognition of qualifications in regulated professions, is an important milestone in promoting mobility of professionals across Europe. The revised directive introduces a "European Professional Card", in the form of an electronic certificate, that should enable quicker recognition of qualifications as well as facilitate temporary mobility for professions that will benefit from it. The directive also defines minimum training requirements for professions benefiting from automatic recognition and foresees the possibility to set up common training frameworks and tests, aimed at broadening opportunities for automatic recognition.

In the framework of the European Research Area, principles for doctoral innovative training²⁵ were developed to provide a common approach to, amongst others, enhance the quality of doctoral training in Europe, increase the dialogue with the industry and the labour market, and foster international networking. The principles offer a useful framework of reference, whilst preserving flexibility and autonomy for institutions and doctoral candidates.

Several sectoral skills and qualification passports have developed through the European sectoral social dialogue²⁶, such as the AgriPass²⁷, the sport and fitness competence frameworks²⁸, the European Qualification and Skills Passport (QSP) in the Hospitality Sector²⁹ and the EMU pass in the metal sector³⁰. These passes promote the recognition of specific sectoral skills, experiences and qualifications, facilitating European mobility within the same sector and can play a role in the phase of identification and documentation of individuals' skills. These passes are not, to date, coordinated with each other and with other existing transparency and recognition tools such as the Europass framework or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

¹⁹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01).

²⁰ The European multilingual classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations, ESCO Portal: <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/home>.

²¹ <http://euskillspace.ec.europa.eu/>.

²² [Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies \(2008/c 319/02\)](#).

²³ As shown in the 2012 [Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training \(ET 2020\)](#), there is good progress in some Member States (AT, DK, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, LT, LU, LV, NL) with regard to lifelong guidance policies.

²⁴ [Directive 2013/55/EU on the modernisation of Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications](#).

²⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/pdf/research_policies/Principles_for_Innovative_Doctoral_Training.pdf. The principles were endorsed in the Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education, Brussels, 28 and 29 November 2011.

²⁶ European Commission (2010), [European Sectoral Social Dialogue: Recent developments](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

²⁷ Cf. <http://www.agripass-online.eu/>.

²⁸ Cf. <http://www.eose.org/EQF/index.php>, <http://www.elearningfitness.eu/elf-project/project-summary-and-objectives>.

²⁹ Cf. <http://www.effat.eu/public/index.php?lang=3&menu=5>.

³⁰ Cf. <http://www.emu-pass.com/>.

The Commission wishes to know the opinions of stakeholders on how European transparency and recognition policies can promote a stronger link between education and training, mobility and the labour market (see section 2 of questionnaire).

3. Adapting to internationalisation trends

Globalisation, technological developments and increased student mobility are blurring the geographical boundaries of education. This phenomenon is especially visible in higher education where Europe attracts around 45% of the internationally mobile student population (roughly 1.8 million students)³¹. Moreover, an increasing number of universities are opening satellite campuses in other countries and more and more study programmes (Master or PhD) are being jointly developed by two or more universities offering joint degrees in different countries.

Recognition of types and levels of qualifications obtained outside Europe (whether full qualifications or parts of it) is an important issue in the context of migration of third country nationals to Europe. Entry conditions for certain categories of migrants make reference to the level and nature of their qualifications, and an assessment of qualifications is therefore part of certain admission procedures. Recognition and transparency procedures can support the integration of third country nationals legally residing in Europe into the labour market, the education and training systems and, more generally, society. Conversely, recognition of qualifications obtained within Europe by other parts of the world is an incentive to attract new talent to Europe.

As already observed in the recent Commission Communication "European higher education in the world"³², increasing mobility flows call for a reinforced transparency and recognition of learning experiences carried out outside Europe (and vice-versa the recognition abroad of European learning experiences) should be a key priority. Worldwide recognition of acquired learning credits should also be strongly encouraged to enhance transparency and "portability" of learning outcomes across international borders. The potential value of this is enhanced by the availability of new ways of teaching and learning made possible by technology and for which the geographical boundaries are less significant.

Some of the European policies and instruments, for example the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS³³) and the EQF, have already attracted the interest of a growing number of third countries.

In its recent conclusions on the global dimension of European higher education³⁴, the Council welcomed the Commission's intention to "promote higher education cooperation for innovation and development between the EU and its global partners, including by [...] undertaking bilateral and multilateral policy dialogues with key international partners", as well as to support "strategic partnerships for cooperation and innovation in higher education, including capacity-building partnerships between EU and third-country HEIs". This could potentially lead to an alignment between the EU instruments and the ones developed by third countries.

³¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

³² COM(2013) 499 final

³³ European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - the credit system for higher education used in the European Higher Education Area, involving all countries engaged in the Bologna Process.

³⁴ Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council 25 – 26 November 2013

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/139717.pdf

The international dimension in vocational education and training is a more complex issue as VET systems outside Europe are very different from those in place in European countries. Qualifications achieved abroad are not easily comparable with European ones and most of them do not meet EQF standards. Credit systems are generally not developed and the provision is mainly private which makes it more heterogeneous and fragmented. Currently, the number of European VET students who move outside the European Union for further studies or work is quite limited (apart from the tourism sector) while the number of non-EU nationals with VET qualifications coming to Europe to work is increasing, especially from Asia and Africa, and it is expected to continue to grow due to demographic and economic trends.

Finally, qualifications developed and awarded by a multitude of private providers, employers, national and international sectoral organisations³⁵ and multinational companies³⁶ are often valued in the labour market. Nevertheless, individuals face difficulties in having these qualifications recognised for further learning and accessing the labour market outside the remit of the multinational company or sector.

The EQF, as a European reference framework for all types and levels of qualifications, including those awarded in and outside formal education and through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, has raised interest in many third countries. It is seen as an instrument that can significantly help in understanding qualifications in Europe and act as a translation tool, facilitating the recognition of qualifications between Europe and third countries.

The Commission wishes to know the opinions of stakeholders on how to promote adaptation of European tools and policies to internationalisation trends (see section 3 of questionnaire)

4. Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach

During the last decade several European instruments have been put in place to facilitate the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications. These include the EQF, quality assurance arrangements, credit systems, tools for documenting qualifications, skills and learning experiences, tools for cooperation on the recognition of qualifications and tools providing skills intelligence. Most tools are supported by networks - in which Member States and stakeholders (from education/training and the labour market) participate - and web applications.

The learning outcomes approach is a key common principle in European transparency and recognition tools. With this approach the results of learning, namely statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process (whether formal, non-formal or informal) are the focus. This is an important shift from an approach based on the duration of learning such as the hours of classroom education. Its transparent use and full implementation can significantly improve the understanding of and trust in qualifications within and across borders, eventually making the recognition of qualifications smoother.

³⁵ Such as international welding qualifications awarded under the rules of the European Welding Association, <http://www.european-welding.org/>.

³⁶ E.g. qualifications awarded by Microsoft.

It is broadly acknowledged that the trustworthy and quality assured use of the learning outcomes approach can strongly contribute to making knowledge, skills and competences acquired in a variety of settings more visible and valued. It can promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning and capture learning in a variety of learning settings outside traditional classrooms, notably at work and through the increasingly important open educational resources³⁷. It can provide the basis for a common language between education/training and the labour market.

There are nonetheless signs that, while the learning outcomes approach was embedded in the initial spirit of most European transparency and recognition instruments, putting it into practice has been a challenge. There are also signs that in most cases teaching and assessment practices have not yet adapted to this approach.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a cross-cutting tool and relates to all types and levels of qualifications and is closely linked to all other tools, no matter the sector (e.g. HE, VET, adult learning) or the dimension (credit systems, quality assurance, learning outcomes, validation of non-formal and informal learning) of the tools. It could play a key role in enhancing the transparency and recognition of skills and competences and promoting the implementation of the learning outcomes approach. However, according to a recent evaluation³⁸, its role in the development of policies and tools for mobility and lifelong learning could be improved, greater coherence with other tools could be achieved, especially in the area of quality assurance, and it should be more directly visible and useful to individuals and stakeholders.

The EQF co-exists with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) agreed by ministers responsible for higher education within the Bologna Process in 2005. The three cycles of the QF EHEA are compatible with EQF level 6-8. Short cycle undergraduate degrees should be referenced to EQF level 5. This correspondence ensures the coherence between both qualifications frameworks. This coherence has also made it possible for most countries³⁹ to carry out their EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification in a single process, and to present a single report addressing the criteria of both processes. Several non-EQF Bologna countries have also developed lifelong learning NQFs based on learning outcomes.

Tools related to credit systems have been developed separately for higher education (developed under the Bologna process) and for vocational education and training (developed under the Copenhagen process). Although the tools have similar objectives and share some common principles, they do not necessarily share the same concepts and are not applied and understood in the same way. For example the concept of units of learning outcomes and credits are not the same in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and in the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET⁴⁰). Concerning ECTS, a revision of the users' guide, expected in 2015, should provide guidelines in implementing the learning outcomes approach in the design, delivery and assessment of education programmes. The ECVET system, on the other hand, has only been implemented to

³⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_educational_resources

³⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/evalreports/education/2013/eqf_en.pdf

³⁹ This applies to 12 countries among the 20 EU MS that have referenced to the EQF, and of 18 countries that have self-certified to the QF EHEA.

⁴⁰ European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training adopted by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 19 June 2009.

a limited extent so far: it has been applied through a large number of (mainly EU-funded) projects, but has no systemic reach yet.

In order to ensure that the learner is at the centre, there should be permeability of education and training sub-systems and flexible learning pathways for individuals within and across borders. This requires communication and cooperation between sub-systems and trust between different players of the education and training system and the labour market.

The Commission wishes to know the opinions of stakeholders in relation to the coherence of the existing landscape of transparency and recognition tools and to investigate how the implementation of the learning outcomes approach could be improved (see section 4 of questionnaire).

5. Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning

While a flexible combination of vocational education and training (VET), higher education and non-formal and informal learning is sometimes crucial to allow individuals to modify or integrate their competences according to personal, social or market needs (e.g. switching from a career path to another, from a sector to another, from a country to another), learners can face difficulties in moving between sub-systems of education and training across and within countries.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention for higher education⁴¹ – supported by the network of national recognition centres (ENIC-NARICs⁴²) - aims to orientate recognition practice in signatory countries, while leaving the final decision on selection of students to higher education institutions, in line with the principles of institutional autonomy. However, it is not always clear whether recognition decisions made by individual institutions take account of the framework provided by the Convention, or the support of the ENIC-NARIC centres, and the reasons behind recognition decisions are not necessarily communicated to the candidate.

In vocational education and training or adult education, there is no European or international coordination or guidance regarding the recognition of qualifications for further studies, which may render cross-border mobility more difficult.

Concerning school education, to date there is no regulation on the recognition of qualifications with each Member States applying its own rules. This hampers mobility of young people and makes it difficult e.g. to continue school education in another country or to start VET in another country than the country of origin or even to begin to work abroad. In addition, different educational pathways can lead to qualifications in school education such as second chance schemes or alternative forms of school education. The recognition of skills and competences achieved in these educational settings is often difficult already at national level and can create even higher barriers to mobility and employment at European level.

The digital revolution, while increasing learning opportunities, is raising new challenges for current tools for transparency and recognition. Massive open online courses (MOOCs⁴³), for

⁴¹ [The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region](#) (11/04/1997), commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention, is an international convention jointly developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

⁴² European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC) and National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC).

⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course

example, offer the possibility to organise learning across countries and continents, in any environment connected to the Internet, but there are currently no clear and commonly accepted principles and procedures to assess and validate their learning outcomes. In particular, online learning does not have geographical boundaries and may require a common approach to the recognition to the skills acquired through it that is not confined to the borders of a state-nation.

The Commission wishes to know stakeholders' opinions on possibilities for making recognition for further learning easier, to support mobility between education and training sub-systems within and across countries (see section 5 of questionnaire).

6. Increasing the focus on quality assurance

In order to deliver higher and more relevant skills, be competitive and make efficient use of resources, education and training systems must ensure the highest quality in their offering.

European quality assurance arrangements have been put in place in different contexts: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG)⁴⁴, European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)⁴⁵ and EQF quality assurance principles⁴⁶.

According to recent evaluations⁴⁷ ESG have helped convergence of quality assurance across countries, but due to their current generic nature they are understood differently and applied unevenly, while at institutional level their penetration and impact remains limited. EQAVET has contributed to advancing a quality culture in VET in European countries, as well as to its practical implementation through operational measures, however, such measures have focused on institutional, school-based provision, with less visible impact on work-based learning and non-formal provision. Moreover, EQAVET's flexible approach and its limited synergies with other tools (e.g. ESG, ECVET) have reduced its potential as a common language and conceptual framework across countries.

The common quality assurance principles of the EQF are broadly compatible with the ESG as well as with the EQAVET. Nevertheless, the principles of the three tools do not provide specific guidance for the quality assurance of the learning outcomes approach, qualifications and qualifications frameworks⁴⁸. Despite the fact that EQF quality assurance principles were to address only vocational education and training and higher education qualifications, they are relevant to other qualifications too. This potential to provide guidance for all levels and all kinds of qualifications in a lifelong learning spectrum should be exploited, especially to support the development of quality assurance mechanisms in other sectors, such as general⁴⁹ and adult education, where they are scarcely present.

⁴⁴ European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education developed by ENQA (European Quality Assurance Network in higher education), ESU (European Student Union), EUA (European University Association) and EURASHE (European association of Higher Education Institutions) and endorsed by ministers of higher education in the Bologna Process in 2005;

⁴⁵ European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training adopted by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council of 18 June 2009

⁴⁶ Annex III to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01).

⁴⁷ Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education (forthcoming), Report on EQAVET (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Evaluation of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) (forthcoming).

⁴⁹ Despite the Recommendation 2001/166/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2001 on European cooperation with regard to the qualitative assessment of school education.

Moreover, individuals increasingly move between systems – both in the traditional initial education pathway and to upgrade and widen their knowledge and skills throughout their lives. More and more learning opportunities no longer fit in conventional classification arrangements. Learners are offered the chance of assembling their learning pathway by selecting opportunities from different sub-systems and forms of delivery, including via learning resources delivered through ICT, and they need to be able to trust their quality.

This may call for a common understanding of quality and a common set of basic principles and guidelines across countries and different education sub-systems whereby mutual trust can be increased and recognition of skills and qualifications, independently of how acquired.

The Commission wishes to know the opinions of stakeholders in relation to increasing coherence in quality assurance arrangements (see section 6 of questionnaire).

7. Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications

Various networks and websites have been created for the tools that are established for facilitating mobility. These include those relating to learning opportunities (Study in Europe⁵⁰, Ploteus⁵¹), job mobility (EURES), traineeships (We Mean Business⁵²) and qualifications (EQF portal⁵³) in 34 countries, aiming to ensure that online information is available and easily accessible. The Europass portal provides the possibility for individuals to upload their Europass CV and European Skills Passport⁵⁴.

Beside online support, information and guidance services (national Europass centres⁵⁵, Euroguidance centres⁵⁶, and Eurodesks⁵⁷) work in each country to provide advice to learners and workers. Another example is Your Europe⁵⁸, offering practical and user-friendly information on EU rights in the single market, in 23 languages. Its target audience are, among other, individuals wanting to study abroad. It contains practical information and links on admission and entry conditions, fees, recognition of academic diploma, student exchanges, healthcare, (etc.).

Both the networks and websites deal with certain aspects of transparency and mobility but none provides a complete overview of the information available in this area. Learners and workers have to find different sources and contact various bodies. In this way, they lose time and energy and the impact of the European tools on their lives is reduced. Moreover, valuable

⁵⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/study-in-europe>

⁵¹ http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/home_en.htm European portal on learning opportunities. Ploteus also give access to further national and international websites that provide information on learning or apprenticeship opportunities in certain sub-systems or for specific target groups. http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/searchcountry_en.htm?country=0&generalType=EG

⁵² <http://we-mean-business.europa.eu/en>

⁵³ The EQF portal has been set up to provide online information on the implementation of the EQF and in particular the results of the relating on national qualifications levels to the EQF by national authorities.

⁵⁴ <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu>

⁵⁵ National Europass Centres coordinate all activities related to the Europass documents. They are the first point of contact for any person or organisation interested in using or learning more about Europass. <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>.

⁵⁶ A network of centres linking together the career guidance systems in Europe; Euroguidance promotes mobility by helping guidance counsellors and individuals to better understand the opportunities available to European citizens throughout Europe: <http://www.euroguidance.net/>

⁵⁷ A network of national Eurodesks providing information on European policies and opportunities for young people.

⁵⁸ <http://europa.eu/youreurope>: Launched in 2005 and entirely revamped in 2010, the portal has become an important reference point for citizens and businesses. Its content is expanding continuously, and the number of visits it receives is steadily increasing, to about 16,000 visitors a day

human and financial resources may be spent on managing different groups and websites which do not necessarily communicate among each other.

The Commission wishes to investigate the possible advantages of the integration of these resources into a single access point for more user-friendly and visible services providing information on skills and qualifications recognition and transparency, reaching the individuals interested in moving within their country or to another European country for learning or working purposes, within and across sectors. Single access points in each country could gather several existing and complementary tools in one single online service.

The services offered could include comprehensive information on learning opportunities (including mobility opportunities supported by the Erasmus+) and on apprenticeship opportunities; information on qualifications and their recognition, access to Europass and Youthpass tools, access to self-assessment tools to measure skills (forthcoming OECD/COM “Education and skills online”) as well as services for providing comprehensive information on employment and working mobility and career guidance services. The single access point would rely on the information provided through the European Skills Panorama and through ESCO.

The Commission wishes to get views on how single access points to reach learners and workers could be established (see section 7 of questionnaire).

ANNEX

European Tools for the transparency and recognition of skills and competences

- European *qualifications frameworks* (QF EHEA⁵⁹ and EQF⁶⁰): they provide a reference point for the comparison of individual qualifications and qualifications systems across countries. They make these more transparent and understandable through common European levels to which national qualifications are referenced on the basis of a comparison of the learning outcomes. In particular the EQF is a cross-cutting tool as it relates to all types and levels of qualifications and is closely linked to all other tools, no matter the sector (e.g. HE, VET, adult learning) or the dimension (credit systems, quality assurance, learning outcomes, validation of non-formal and informal learning) of the tools.
- Common European *quality assurance arrangements* (ESG⁶¹, EQAR⁶² and EQAVET⁶³) pursue improving mutual trust towards the education and qualifications systems of the different participating countries. By ensuring that countries have a common understanding of quality and respect a number of principles regarding the quality of their education provision as well as certification process, qualifications or parts of qualifications should be more trusted among countries and thus recognition should be easier.
- European *credit systems* (ECTS⁶⁴ and ECVET⁶⁵) facilitate and support learners in shaping their own learning pathway through accumulation of credits – whether within a certain institution, from institution to institution, from country to country, and between different educational sub-systems and contexts of learning (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal learning), and helping them to build on their individual learning styles and experiences.
- *Tools for the documentation of qualifications, skills and learning experiences* are provided to individuals to describe their acquired knowledge, skills, competences and qualifications in a more transparent and structured way (*the Europass framework including the Europass CV and the European Skills Passport*⁶⁶). They support the international comparability of learning outcomes acquired in various contexts, for example, in formal education, through validation of non-formal and informal learning, through mobility or work experience and voluntary activities. Sometimes they have

⁵⁹ Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area agreed by ministers responsible for higher education within the Bologna Process in 2005

⁶⁰ European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, launched by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 23 April 2008.

⁶¹ European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education developed by ENQA (European Quality Assurance Network in higher education) and endorsed by ministers of higher education in the Bologna Process in 2009;

⁶² European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education – which was established by ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU founded in March 2008.

⁶³ European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training adopted by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council of 18 June 2009

⁶⁴ European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - the credit system for higher education used in the European Higher Education Area, involving all countries engaged in the Bologna Process.

⁶⁵ European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training adopted by the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 19 June 2009

⁶⁶ Decision no 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)

supported the implementation of EU programmes (*Youthpass*⁶⁷). These tools support the better understanding of qualifications in formal recognition processes.

- European *cooperation on the recognition of qualifications* for further learning or for jobs (ENIC/NARIC⁶⁸, Lisbon Recognition Convention⁶⁹, the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications) provides common rules and networks of information points that should make recognition procedures quicker and mobility smoother.
- In the Council Recommendation⁷⁰ on the on the *validation of non-formal and informal learning* of 20 December 2012 (2012/C 398/01), Member States agreed to put in place arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences by 2018, allowing individuals to obtain a qualification (or part of it) on the basis of their validated experiences. These arrangements should be linked to qualifications frameworks and should rely on transparent quality assurance measures, supporting reliable, valid and credible validation methodologies and tools.
- European tools for *labour market intelligence: the European Skills Panorama*⁷¹ launched in December 2012 gathers comprehensive intelligence at European level on skills supply and skills needs in various sectors in the labour market. This aims at informing policy makers on how education systems can respond to the needs of the labour market. The European multilingual classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (*ESCO*)⁷² launched in October 2013 presents a common language bridging education and the labour market.
- European mobility is further supported by dedicated *information websites and services* of the various European tools listed above as well as portals providing information on learning opportunities (*Study in Europe*⁷³, *Ploteus*⁷⁴), traineeships (*We Mean Business*⁷⁵) and qualifications (EQF portal⁷⁶) in 34 countries. These portals aim to ensure that online information is available and easily accessible. Beside online support, information and guidance services (national Europass centres⁷⁷, Euroguidance centres⁷⁸, and Eurodesks⁷⁹) work in each country to provide advice to individuals.

⁶⁷ www.youthpass.eu.

⁶⁸ National Academic Recognition Information Centres set up in 1984 to provide information on foreign education systems and the recognition of foreign diplomas; <http://www.enic-naric.net/>; http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/naric_en.htm;

⁶⁹ Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in April 1997 and entered into force in 50 countries.

⁷⁰ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

⁷¹ <http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu>

⁷² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=852>

⁷³ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/study-in-europe/>

⁷⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/home_en.htm European portal on learning opportunities. Ploteus also give access to further national and international websites that provide information on learning or apprenticeship opportunities in certain sub-systems or for specific target groups. http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/searchcountry_en.htm?country=0&generalType=EG

⁷⁵ <http://we-mean-business.europa.eu/en>

⁷⁶ The EQF portal has been set up to provide online information on the implementation of the EQF and in particular the results of the relating on national qualifications levels to the EQF by national authorities.

⁷⁷ National Europass Centres coordinate all activities related to the Europass documents. They are the first point of contact for any person or organisation interested in using or learning more about Europass, <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>.

⁷⁸ A network of centres linking together the career guidance systems in Europe; Euroguidance promotes mobility by helping guidance counsellors and individuals to better understand the opportunities available to European citizens throughout Europe: <http://www.euroguidance.net/>

⁷⁹ A network of national [Eurodesks](http://www.eurodesks.eu) providing information on European policies and opportunities for young people.

ANNEX II: PROPOSED QUESTIONS

The questions presented here below are those related to the issues discussed in the background document to the Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications.

Respondents will be asked to reply to the questions through a dedicated EUSurvey online questionnaire, "Towards a European Area of Skills and Qualification". All questions are optional. Respondents are free to choose to reply only to some of the proposed questions and focus on particular issues, according to their interests.

The questionnaire will also include an initial section in which respondents will be asked to provide sufficient information to assess the representativeness of responses per clusters: e.g. whether they are answering as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, country of residence, age group, gender, level of education, sector they are working in, etc.

An invitation to submit position papers is also made in the questionnaire.

1. How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills

Closed questions:

1. Should curricula and assessment practices be more focused on boosting transversal skills such as digital, language and entrepreneurial competences?
2. Would it be useful to develop reference frameworks describing learning outcomes per level per competence, following the example of the language competence framework⁸⁰?
3. Would it be useful to have more hands-on experts from the employers' side involved in the design of the curricula?

Open question:

4. What has been the effectiveness and value of the European Key Competences Framework⁸¹ so far in promoting the competences that it refers to?
5. Could other European initiatives than the European Key Competences Framework be more effective? If yes, which ones?

2. Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility

⁸⁰ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf.

⁸¹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ll-learning/keycomp_en.pdf.

and the labour market

Closed questions:

6. To help individuals take advantage of available opportunities in a wider and more open context, career guidance policies and practices are crucial. Are you aware of the European policies on career guidance?
7. Is it useful to be able to use a common multilingual European terminology (such as ESCO⁸²) to support describing learning outcomes of education and training programmes in terms of knowledge, skills competences relevant to the labour market?
8. Should forecasts on skills supply and needs be better integrated into the education and training strategy in order to reduce skills mismatches?
9. Several sectoral skills and qualification passports have been developed that promote the recognition of skills, experiences and qualifications, facilitating transnational mobility within the same sector⁸³. They can play a role in the phase of identification and documentation of skills. Do sectoral skills and qualifications passports or cards have added value compared to more general European documentation tools such as Europass, e.g. for cross border mobility of learners and workers?
10. Is better integration between these passports and the Europass framework needed?

Open questions:

11. How can guidance services be organised to best support learners and workers in their educational, training and occupational choices and facilitate their participation in the labour market?
12. What new features should initiatives such as EQF, ESCO, European Skills Panorama and the sector skills alliances include in order to raise the understanding of skills needs and on the communication between education and the labour market?
13. If you think that better integration between sectoral passports and the Europass framework is needed, please give your suggestions on how it could be achieved.

3. Adapting to internationalisation trends

Closed questions:

14. A number of qualifications awarded at international level (e.g. by international sectoral organisations and multinational companies) are often valued in the labour

⁸² European multilingual Classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations, <https://ec.europa.eu/esco>.

⁸³ The AgriPass (<http://www.agripass-online.eu/>), the sport and fitness competence frameworks (<http://www.eose.org/EQF/index.php>, <http://www.elearningfitness.eu/elf-project/project-summary-and-objectives>), the European Qualification and Skills Passport (QSP) in the Hospitality Sector (<http://www.effat.eu/public/index.php?lang=3&menu=5>), and the EMU pass in the metal sector (<http://www.emu-pass.com/>).

market. Is European level coordination needed to facilitate the recognition of such qualifications throughout Europe?

15. Should criteria and procedures be developed for the inclusion of international qualifications in National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF)?

16. An increasing number of study programmes, such as Masters or PhDs are being jointly developed by two or more higher education institutions in different countries offering joint degrees. Are existing recognition arrangements suitable for the recognition of these degrees?

Open questions:

17. What further steps could be taken at EU level to promote mutual recognition of qualifications, credits or learning outcomes between the EU and third countries? Could the EQF be useful in this context? If yes, how?

18. What further steps could be taken at EU level to promote the recognition of joint degrees offered by European higher education institutions in cooperation with institutions from other parts of the world?

4. Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach

Closed questions:

19. In your opinion, are the current tools⁸⁴ seen altogether clear and understandable?

20. The learning outcomes approach (what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process) is a key common principle in European transparency and recognition tools. Its transparent use and full implementation can significantly improve the understanding of and trust in qualifications within and across borders, eventually making the recognition of qualifications smoother.

a. Should qualifications and study programmes be systematically described in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge skills and competences to be acquired)?

b. Would a common definition of "unit of learning outcomes" and "credit" between higher education and vocational education and training be desirable?

c. Could the use of the learning outcomes approach support the validation of non-formal and informal learning?

d. Do you consider the current European tools for the documentation of

⁸⁴ See annex I of the Background note to the consultation.

learning experiences satisfactory or unsatisfactory?

21. Do you consider the possible integration of Europass tools and self-assessment tools to document non-formal and informal learning outcomes (such as the Youthpass) in a common framework useful?
22. Would you support a development towards a single supplement documenting learning outcomes acquired in formal education bringing closer together the Diploma Supplement (for higher education) and the Certificate Supplement (for Vocational Education and Training)?

Open questions:

23. What are, in your opinion, the obstacles to base curricula design and assessment practices on a learning outcomes approach?
24. What actions are needed at EU level to enhance the synergies between the European Qualification Framework and the Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area and build a common reference for all qualifications levels for all participating countries? Should the adoption by all countries of a single referencing process combining EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification be promoted?
25. Do you have any further suggestions for simplifying and for improving the coherence of the European transparency and recognition tools?

5. Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning

Closed questions:

26. In order to enable individuals to move more freely between the different sub-systems of education and training, within and across countries, the recognition of skills and competences needs to be improved.
 - a. While respecting national competences, should European criteria and procedures for the recognition of qualifications for further learning be developed in the areas of adult learning and general education?
 - b. For the purposes of further learning (and in the context of the autonomy of higher education institutions), are the criteria used by higher education institutions for recognising qualifications acquired in another Member State sufficiently clear, transparent and accommodating of learners' needs?
 - c. Should European criteria and procedures for the recognition of vocational qualifications for further learning within and across Member States be developed?
 - d. Would a European system of recognition of skills, competences and

qualification in school education help improving mobility and employability of young people?

27. To which extent are validation systems and credit systems suitable to recognise the outcomes of new forms of learning such as digital learning (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses, MOOCs)?

28. Would it be desirable to develop common criteria and procedures for recognition that could apply to all education and training sub-systems (for vocational education and training, schools, adult education), and all qualifications related to European qualifications frameworks (including those obtained through validation of non-formal and informal learning, open on-line courses, private qualifications, etc.)?

Open questions:

29. Which measures, if any, should be taken at the EU level to improve the recognition of learning outcomes related to new forms of learning such as learning through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)?

30. In case you agree with question 28, please provide your suggestions here on how such criteria could be developed.

6. Increasing the focus on quality assurance

Closed questions:

31. In order to enable learners to assemble their tailor-made learning pathways by selecting learning opportunities from different sub-systems and forms of delivery, it is necessary to develop a common understanding of quality across countries and different education sub-systems.

- a. Is it possible to identify some common basic principles and guidelines of quality assurance valid across sectors and applicable to all qualifications?
- b. Should there be a core of common European quality assurance principles for the provision of learning opportunities in all sectors of education and training?

32. In your opinion, to which extent are existing quality assurance principles and credit systems suitable to support new forms of learning, such as digital learning (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses, MOOCs)?

Open questions:

33. If you agree with question 31 b, please provide here your suggestions on what could be the common basic principles and guidelines for quality assurance applicable to all qualifications.

7. Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications

Closed questions:

34. Could learners and workers benefit from a one-stop shop providing integrated services - including their supporting platforms - covering the full range of European services on learning opportunities, career guidance and recognition of qualifications for employment purposes or further learning.
35. In your opinion, to which extent is it desirable to create integrated service-points for learners and workers covering the full range of European services currently spread over the networks of ENIC/NARIC, Europass, Euroguidance, NQF-NCP?
36. Is the current landscape of webtools in the area of skills and qualifications (Europass Portal, Your Europe, Study in Europe, We mean Business, Ploteus, EQF Portal, European Skills Panorama, ESCO) effective/ineffective?
37. Do you consider useful/not useful to provide individuals with self-assessment tools for measurement of knowledge skills and competences?
38. If you are working in the ENIC/NARIC, Europass, Euroguidance, NQF-NCP networks, please answer the following:
- a. How frequently do you work with the following networks? *The answer categories should list the networks quoted as well as Eures Advisers and Europe Direct, National Agency, Eurodesk.*
 - b. How would you rate your contacts with other European services in your country in terms of cooperation?

Open questions:

39. If you agree with question 34, please provide here your suggestions on *what could be the features of this one-stop shop.*