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*Further improvement of the system for development and implementation
of the National Qualifications Framework*

Guidelines

The role of the Sectoral Qualification Councils in the process of adapting existing qualifications

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INTRODUCTION

Adapting existing qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF) requirements should be understood as a task for each country implementing EQF principles into national qualifications system. This task should be treated as a large-scale project. A set of activities has to be conducted by defined actors within a specified time-frame. Adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements is the key element of implementation process of qualifications system based on a qualifications framework. Important actors in this process are Sectoral Qualification Councils (SQC). SQCs are to be involved in conducting the national qualification policy at the sectoral level and in adapting particular qualifications.

This guideline document is addressed particularly to members of the SQCs to provide support in conducting the process of adapting existing qualifications in a given sector. This document might also be useful for other bodies and stakeholders involved in the process of implementation of the system based on a qualifications framework in the country.

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1. SECTORAL QUALIFICATION COUNCIL AS A HOST OF QUALIFICATIONS IN THE SECTOR

Setting up SQCs is envisaged in the Law on NQF (article 18). The law states that SQCs will conduct wide-range activities related to qualifications in their sectors, especially they will:

- analyse the condition and trends of the labour market,
- identify the needs for all types of qualifications,
- propose qualifications for the sector or sub-sector of qualifications from different levels,
- analyse and evaluate existing qualifications,
- review proposals for the inclusion of new qualifications,
- propose priorities in developing new and amending existing qualifications,
- prepare the basic profile of qualifications,
- give opinion on the harmonisation of the occupational and qualification standards with the examination programmes,
- form a committee for examination and verification of learning outcomes in non-formal education and training,
- promote the qualification sectors and the possibilities for employment in them (see article 19).

Each SQC has a President and eight members, one member from: the competent ministry, Ministry of Education and Science, association of employers, representative union of the employees, universities, Vocational Education and Training Centre, Adult Education Centre, Bureau for Development of Education, and the relevant authorities for regulated professions, e.g. bar associations, medical associations, chamber of engineers (see article 18).

SQC is obliged by the Law on NQF to cooperate with the National Board for Macedonian Qualification Framework (article 16) and Ministry of Education and Science (NQF Unit) and relevant ministries and stakeholders in a given sector.

From the above mentioned provisions one can conclude that the SQCs are important bodies involved in conducting national qualifications policy in a given sector.

The Law on NQF indicates the following 16 sectors (article 14):

1. Geology, mining and metallurgy
2. Civil engineering and geodesy
3. Graphic industry
4. Economics, law and trade
5. Electrical engineering
6. Healthcare and social protection
7. Agriculture, fishing and veterinary medicine

8. Personal services
9. Mechanical engineering
10. Traffic, transport and storage
11. Textile, leather and similar products
12. Food service industry and tourism
13. Chemistry and technology
14. Forestry and wood processing
15. Sport and recreation
16. Arts

2. ADAPTING OF EXISTING QUALIFICATIONS IN THE SECTOR AS A PROJECT TO REALISE

Adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements in particular sector must be treated as very important part of the national large-scale project implementing the qualifications system based on the qualifications framework.

From this point of view adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements in a particular sector should be treated as the typical project that need to be realised. It means that each SQC should plan in the first stage plan the realisation of the project. In the next stage the project should be realised.

SQCs submit the working plan of the project (including the request for the needed resources) to the relevant public authorities. Having received the approval of the working plan of the project from the relevant public authority, the SQC should begin its implementation.

In the first step, the SQC need to harmonise this working plan with the acquired resources from the relevant public authorities. It might turn out that the time-frame of conducting the project will need to be appropriately corrected. It might also turn out that it will be needed to increase or decrease the number of experts or institutions involved in the project. Moreover, other modifications of the working plan of the project including the budget might be needed during the project realisation.

Additional remark:

Introducing any social change requires understanding and acceptance in the society, especially by the relevant stakeholders. Conducting dialogue with relevant stakeholders in the preparatory phase allows to acquire additional important information and arguments which might not be known before by the bodies and institutions responsible for introducing the change. On the other hand, dialogue builds ownership of the new solutions what is the necessary condition of their effective implementation. That is why SQCs should be involved in dialogue with relevant stakeholders on all stages of the process of adapting existing qualifications in their sectors.

3. PLANNING OF THE PROJECT

While preparing the working plan, SQCs should determine:

- A. the scope of activities in this project of adapting existing qualifications in the sector,
- B. institutions, bodies, stakeholders and experts who will be involved in the project and distribute particular tasks between them,
- C. the time-frame for each planned activities in the project,
- D. plan of the needed financial resources.

A. Determining the scope of activities in the project of adapting existing qualifications in the sector

The characteristic of the sector

In order to define the scope of the activities within the project, as soon as the SQC is established, the SQC has to define the characteristic of the sector. It might be done by answering among the others on the following questions:

1. What occupations and professions belong to the sector?
2. What are the skills needs in the sector?
3. What are the relevant sectoral stakeholders and institutions?

While preparing the characteristic of the sector, all possible tools and sources of information should be used, e.g. different registers, classifications, inventories, reports on existing occupations and qualifications produced by various institutions (e.g. Centre of Analysis, State Statistical Office, Employment Service Agency) as well as within national and international projects¹.

All aspects and dimensions of the sectors should be taken into account, including: occupations, professions in the sector, employers and employment, share of the sector in the GDP, skills demand and educational offer, number of students and graduates within the sector including number of students that went abroad. The summarising analysis should conclude about the supply and demand for specialists in the sector at present and in the future.

¹ See: *Referencing of the National Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework*, European Training Foundation; *Skills Development and Innovation Support*, World Bank; *Enhancing LifeLong Learning through modernizing VET and adult education systems*, British Council; *Support to the modernization of the system for post-secondary education*, IPA Twinning Light Project; *Developing cooperation between higher education institutions, private sector and relevant public bodies*, IPA Twinning Project; *Implementation of the legislation on mutual recognition of professional qualifications*.

One of the possible ways to show the overall picture of the sector is to create the functional map of the sector². The map should show among others: the number of employed and unemployed people in the sector, key stakeholders, educational and training providers, number of learners, self-governments, unions and employers' organisations. The analyses should reveal what qualifications are being awarded in the sector, define competences for a given occupation and also show possibilities of progression. But the most important is the information on the demand for qualifications in the labour market.

The inventory of the qualifications

The SQCs should conduct the inventory of all existing qualifications in the sector for the purpose of recommending which qualifications need to be included in the NQF system and which of them need to be adapted to the EQF and NQF requirements.

While proposing existing qualifications from the sector for inclusion, it might be helpful to answer among the others on the following questions:

1. What qualifications (of different types and levels) are functioning in the sector?
2. What criteria should be taken into account in selecting qualifications for inclusion?
3. Which of the functioning qualifications should be selected for inclusion in the NQF system?
4. Which of the selected qualifications should be adapted?
5. Which qualifications should be included urgently?

Ad. 1 It is highly important to have a detailed and up to date list of qualifications functioning in the given sector. While preparing the list of qualifications in a given sector all possible sources of information should be used, e.g. different registers, inventories, reports on existing occupations and qualifications. It might be useful for the SQCs to conduct their own reviews using for example the questionnaires sent to institutions and stakeholders.

Ad. 2 As far as the national criteria of selecting existing qualifications are defined, the SQCs should follow them. If the national criteria have not been defined, then the SQCs should develop the criteria for their sectors preferable in cooperation with other SQCs. These criteria should relate to: priorities indicated in the strategies of development of a country, labour market needs, social needs, local and sectoral traditions³.

Ad. 3 – Ad. 5 From the list of qualifications functioning in the sector, the SQCs prepare the recommendations which qualifications should be included in the NQF system. While preparing the recommendations SQCs should consult their proposals with the relevant institutions and

² During meetings organised within the NQF Twinning project, some participants indicated that developing the functional maps of the sector is of high practical value. They indicated that in the country functional maps for 14 sectors have already been created.

³ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that the labour needs should be the main criterion in selecting qualification for adapting. Those qualifications for which there is the largest demand should be included first (e.g. car mechanic, hairdresser, beautician).

stakeholders in the sector⁴. Preparation of this recommendation should be conducted taking into account the principle of dialogue and trying to reach consensus.

Because there are many qualifications functioning in the market and in the education system it is not possible to include all of them at the same time. And that is why it should be done step by step and according to defined rules. Qualifications that need to be included urgently should be indicated and adapted in the first place, for example qualifications crucial in a given sector⁵.

Additional remark:

Preparation of the characteristic of the sector and the inventory of existing qualifications for the purpose of including the NQF system might reveal what qualifications are missing in the sector and need to be developed as well as what qualifications should be ceased to award.

In proposing new qualifications for development, the SQCs must include input from employers providing information on the demand for skills and qualifications in the sector. Those qualifications which are not useful for the national, regional and foreign labour markets should be ceased.

B. Determining institutions, bodies, stakeholders and experts involved in the conducting the process of adapting and distributing tasks between them

Defining composition of the working group and division of tasks

Having a prepared recommendations of qualifications for adapting to NQF and EQF requirements, SQCs should propose members of the working groups who will be involved in adapting process of given qualification.

Typically the working group should compose of 3–7 persons depending on the specificity and complexity of the qualification.

The members of the working groups have to possess the relevant competences and experience. The requirements toward those members should be in line with rules defined at national level. If those rules are not defined each SQC should develop its own requirements regarding members' competences and experience. If the members of SQC do not possess the required competences or experience, then the SQC should invite the relevant external experts.

It is needed to appoint the expert who will lead the process of adapting (preferably in both stages). The lead expert should have the possibility to receive support from specialists from a given field and relevant stakeholders who are not members of the working group.

⁴ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that in the consultation process websites might be used as the platform for exchanging ideas.

⁵ Participants of the sectoral workshop gave an example of the tourist guide as a crucial qualification for the development of the tourism sector and for this reason this qualification should be included urgently in the NQF and national qualifications registry.

Later, at the of stage of realisation of the project, the SQC appoints a reviewer of the filled-in check list and a reviewer of the proposal of the modification of an existing qualification to fulfil the NQF and EQF requirements.

Defining partners to be involved in the consultations

The important element of the process of adapting during the both stages: analysis and modification are the consultations with relevant experts and stakeholders⁶. SQC should indicate relevant institutions, bodies and experts who will be involved in consultations during the process of adapting. It should be kept in mind that employers have limited time and they might not have possibility to join all relevant discussions and consultations.

Selecting consultants should be separated from the political context because qualifications are a common value in the country.

C. Defining the time-frame of the project

Defining the time is important part of the working plan of the project. The time frame must be defined after the defining the scope of activities and in the context of available resources (experts, organisational and financial capacities).

If the time frame of the process of adapting existing qualifications is defined on the national then the SQCs should respect it in defining its own time frame for adapting qualifications in its sector. In defining the time frame the SQCs should take into consideration the available resources and conditions in the sector (e.g. the number and specificity of qualifications selected for adapting, number of available experts to be involved in adapting, availability of documents)⁷. The time frame should envisage some time margin for unexpected situations. Modifications of the time-frame might be needed during the project realisation.

D. Plan of the needed financial resources

Each SQC should indicate what activities related to the process of adapting project need to be financed. Involvement of representatives of public institutions and stakeholders who cooperate with the SQCs in realisation of the project within their statutory tasks might not be financed from the budget of the project. However, the works of external experts significantly involved in the

⁶ Information about this process see: "Manual of adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements for experts involved in adapting particular qualifications".

⁷ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that the process of adapting might be time-consuming between six months to two years (as related activities cover creating working groups, involving employers, masters of craft etc.).

project of adapting should be enumerated⁸ and included in the budget of the project (compare article 18 of the Law on NQF). SQCs should propose the budget of the project to relevant authorities for the approval.

4. REMARKS ON REALISATION OF A PROJECT

In order to begin the realisation in a rational manner the SQCs should address the following questions:

- E. How to organise activities of the working group?
- F. How to assure quality of outcomes of the process of adapting existing qualifications?

E. Organising activities of the working group

The Ministry of Education (NQF Unit) coordinates the process of adapting existing qualifications at national level, whereas the Sectoral Qualification Councils should coordinate this process at the sectoral level and gather together various stakeholders in order to represent all interest groups⁹.

To fulfil its role, the SQCs should organise works of the working groups conducting adapting existing qualifications. Each SQC should fulfil the following tasks:

1. Establishing working groups to adapt particular qualifications in the sector
2. Dividing tasks between working groups
3. Agreeing about mode of communication between SQC and working groups
4. Defining principles of organisation of work of working groups
5. Defining how the work on adapting particular qualification is documented

Ad. 1. See point B in section 3.

Ad. 2. Selected qualifications for adapting in the sector must be divided between working groups. In practice it may turn out that one working group will adapt a group of similar

⁸ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that proper working conditions and incentives for experts (and stakeholders) taking part in the consultations should be ensured – it will support the effectiveness of the works on adapting existing qualifications.

⁹ During the sectoral workshop there was discussion regarding the need for signing the cooperation protocols or memorandums. Some participants indicated the these documents must signed at the level of each sector. However, other participants did not agree with this opinion arguing that to Law on NQF the roles and responsibilities of all partners have already been defined and it is of higher importance than protocols signed on the level of each SQC.

qualifications. In this case it is important to decide by SQC which qualifications will be adapted in what order. It is also important to decide what qualifications might be adapted simultaneously as in some cases this approach will be the most effective¹⁰.

Ad. 3. It is necessary that SQC agrees with all working groups useful mode of communication. Moreover, it is important that all working groups can communicate for the purpose of sharing of experiences and mutual support. It may be effective to use electronical way of communication, for example Moodle platform.

Ad. 4. SQC appoints a lead expert within each working group. Lead expert plays a very important role as an organiser of activities of working group. Lead expert divides tasks among members of working groups, defines calendar of meetings, their agendas, and moderates the meetings. Lead expert is responsible for documentation of works of the working group. It is important to prepare necessary documents for discussions (beforehand) and outcomes of discussions and outcomes of consultation (afterwards). He is also responsible for working contacts with SQC especially with member of the SQC responsible for the project.

It is important to decide how the group reaches conclusions during analysis and modifications stages. If the national rules are not defined, SQCs preferably in joint cooperation should decide how working groups reach conclusions and in what situations the particular way of reaching conclusions is used (unanimity, majority, solely by the lead expert).

In conducting the adaptation of existing qualification it is recommended to use the “Manual of adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements for experts involved in adapting particular qualifications” and other existing documents regarding developing and modifications qualifications¹¹.

Ad. 5. The outcomes of the working group activities, especially final results of analysis stage, proposals of modifications in a given existing qualification and the outcomes of external revisions, should be documented properly. The filled-in check-list presented in the Manual is recommended as the best way of documentation of analysis stage. Adequately and duly prepared documentation determines the effectiveness and transparency of the whole process of adapting.

¹⁰ For example: it is useful to adapt simultaneously qualifications of stylist and hairdresser.

¹¹ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that in adapting existing qualification will be useful guidelines on converting teaching aims into learning outcomes prepared in partnership with the British Council.

F. Assuring quality of outcomes of the process of adapting existing qualifications

In order to assure quality of outcomes of the process of adapting existing qualification to EQF and NQF requirements, the following issues need to be taken into account:

Using quality assurance principles and procedures

- Standards and procedures are well designed and followed by all actors involved in the process of adapting.
- The process of adapting must be duly planned and set in an appropriate time-frame. The time pressure should be avoided as short deadlines are affecting the outcomes of all kind of work.
- Working groups conducting adapting existing qualification have to consist of members that are practitioners, theoreticians, teachers, instructors¹².
- Members of the working groups should be provided with relevant information about the European Qualifications Framework and national qualifications framework and should be trained on how to use the “Manual of adapting existing qualifications to NQF and EQF requirements for experts involved in adapting particular qualifications”.¹³
- Members of the working groups when making their statements are obliged to present their explanation and justification (arguments which were taken by them into consideration).
- Every important outcome prepared during subsequent stages of the project (e.g. proposed list of qualifications which need to be included in the NQF system along with a list of qualifications that need to be included urgently, filled-in checklist, proposals of qualifications modifications) before its final adoption should be subjected to opinions of people who have not participated in the process of its creation. Opinions should be collected from all stakeholders who are relevant for a subject of these opinions. All opinions of relevant stakeholders should be included in the documentation of the process of adapting particular existing qualification.
- Filled-in checklist and proposals of modified qualifications before their final approval should be reviewed by experts who have not participated in their creation. In the case of significant doubts or controversies it might be useful to obtain additional opinion or review from a foreign expert. All of the external reviews should be included in the documentation of the process of adapting particular existing qualification.

¹²Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that members of the working groups need to be adequately motivated for their work, especially financially.

¹³ Participants of the sectoral workshop indicated the importance of trainings on using the Manuals.

Transparency of activities in the implementation of the NQF system in the sector

- Conducting adequate informing policy targeted to society and especially to relevant stakeholders involved in the process of implementation of the NQF system¹⁴. Within this policy it very important to assure access to information about adapting existing qualification e.g. using dedicated websites and systematically updating information presented on the websites and other means of communication and at the same eliminate obsolete information to prevention against information noise. The NQF registry and inventory of qualifications might be used as instruments to ensure access to relevant documents and information.
- Caring about using the precise and coherent terminology and communicativeness of the language used in documents and information materials.

¹⁴ Some participants of the sectoral workshop indicated that many stakeholders and society are not aware about existence or competences of relevant public institutions responsible for conducting educations policies, e.g. some teachers do not know about existence of the VET Centre. It was also indicated that stakeholders are not interested in acquiring and searching information.