PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY 'UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL LEAVING QUALIFICATIONS (SLQS) GIVING DIRECT ACCESS TO FIRST CYCLE DEGREE COURSES AND THEIR PLACE IN THE EQF: THE STORIES BEHIND THE NUMBERS'

2 – 3 June 2016, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Summary report

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1   INTRODUCTION

On 2 and 3 June 2016, a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, focusing on **upper secondary school leaving qualifications (SLQs[1]) giving direct access to first cycle degree courses and their place in the EQF**. This PLA was hosted by the EQF National Coordination Points of Ireland and the UK in cooperation with the European Commission and Cedefop. Approximately 40 participants from various European countries attended the event.

PLA objectives

Most countries have now completed a referencing process where the levels of the national qualifications framework (NQF) have been officially linked to levels in the EQF. In most of these countries, the NQF contains school leaving qualifications (SLQs). Therefore, they are linked to an EQF level. One feature of the SLQs is that they can provide the holder with direct access, or even an entitlement, to the first cycle of higher education (HE). While it may be expected that these qualifications are referenced to the same EQF level, there is evidence that this is not always the case, and that countries have encountered challenges in establishing the relationship between SLQs and their NQF.

The purpose of the PLA was to facilitate a better understanding of the contexts, processes and outcomes when relating school leaving qualifications to National Qualifications Frameworks. More specifically, the PLA aimed to:

- analyse the extent to which learning outcomes influence the levelling of SLQs within NQFs and identify other factors that are important in identifying a level for an SLQ;

- identify perceived cross national inconsistencies in the way SLQs are linked to NQF levels;

- inform the future development of the EQF referencing process, particularly the process of horizontal comparisons; and

- explore the extent to which NQF and EQF levels of SLQs are used in valuing SLQs for cross border mobility purposes.

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the discussions that took place during the PLA. The report should be used to support the work of the Commission and participants in the PLA in disseminating the results of the activities of the PLA to countries' stakeholders and other social partners.

The report is structured according to the main topics of the PLA and draws on a range of presentations and country cases that formed the PLA. The agenda for the PLA is included in Annex A.

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[1] Throughout this document, the abbreviation 'SLQ' is used for denominating upper secondary school leaving qualifications giving direct access to first cycle degree courses.

2   PLA STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Day 1 began with a welcoming address by Justin Edwards (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, Northern Ireland) and by Susanne Lonscher-Räcke (European Commission). It was emphasised that this PLA would build on the outcomes of previous PLAs, and particularly on the PLA on school leaving qualifications held in Tallinn (EE) in 2011.

In the first input presentation, John O'Connor (EQF-NCP Ireland) presented the main findings of a survey on upper secondary school leaving qualifications (SLQs), carried out ahead of the PLA to document the current state of play regarding SLQs and their relationship with the EQF and thus provide quantitative and qualitative inputs to the PLA. Survey findings confirm that SLQs primarily correspond to EQF level 4, but also highlight the complexity around level of comparability and comparability of level across apparently similar qualifications.

Jens Bjørnavold (Cedefop) provided an outline on the ongoing Cedefop study on 'The role of learning outcomes in supporting dialogue between education and training and the labour market'. The key objective of the study, which covers both European and non-European countries, is – through a focus on learning outcomes – to understand the way vocational education and training qualifications are being defined, reviewed and renewed. Although the study does not particularly focus on SLQs, it is the methodology applied for the comparative analysis of qualifications that is of particular interest for the work towards a methodology for comparative analysis of qualifications across qualifications frameworks.

Ewa Chmielecka (Institute of Educational Research, PL) presented the methodology of an ongoing pilot project on horizontal comparisons of levelled qualifications in NQFs. This work, undertaken by a subgroup of the EQF Advisory Group, addresses the topic of consistency of levelling decisions across countries by fine-tuning and testing a methodology for the comparison of levelling decisions.

These presentations set the scene for the following workshop sessions, in which selected topics related to upper secondary school leaving qualifications were discussed in more detail. Each session began with two presentations of national case studies, followed by a discussion. Case study presentations included examples from Portugal, Latvia, France, Netherlands, Ireland, Estonia, UK-Scotland, Norway and Luxembourg.

Day 2

Day 2 began with two more workshop sessions. One session focused on the extent to which vocational SLQs lead to first cycle programmes, while the second session focused on SLQs in the context of regional mobility. To conclude the PLA, Aileen Ponton and Susanne Lonscher-Räcke summarised the key discussion points, and reflected on how the outcomes of this PLA could be used to inform the EQF referencing process.

The **main key messages**, observations and pending questions of the PLA can be summarised as follows:

General aspects

- Upper secondary school leaving qualifications are **not a homogeneous group** of qualifications. A lot of work is needed to understand them better.

- Upper secondary school leaving qualifications – both vocational and general SLQs - **primarily correspond to EQF level 4**, with only a very few isolated cases where such qualifications correspond to EQF level 3 or 5.

- To understand and trust the level of SLQs, it is essential to **uncover the technical process and the socio-political influences** that underpin the process. Besides

learning outcomes, there are political, cultural, social and pragmatic aspects that play a role in the levelling of qualifications.

- There might be some **cross-national influences** on national qualifications (levels), especially with SLQs. The levelling of SLQs in particular might have followed different rules than it is the case for other qualifications, reflecting a certain pressure that 'it has to be on level 4'.

- **Learning outcomes remain at the core.** While there is agreement that learning outcomes alone are not sufficient to explain the levelling of a qualification, and that there are extra layers to discuss, they still remain at the core.

- In most countries, SLQs have the role of an **anchor qualification**, playing a very significant role in the national qualifications context. The case of Ireland suggests that in some cases, the NQF might need general school leaving qualifications more than these qualifications need a qualifications framework.

Progression possibilities provided by vocational SLQs

- **Importance of visibility of vocational routes into HE.** It is important to create visible vocational routes for learners – whether this is through universities or other institutions; a positioning of universities as the 'gold standard' may be questioned.

- **Access vs. admission.** In most countries, there is access – whether direct or not – to first cycle higher education studies for holders of VET SLQs. However, HE access and admission must be separated. In most cases, HEIs are generally free to set their own admission criteria. This may lead to situations where, in practice, some vocational SLQs will be accepted by some universities for some courses (but not others).

- **Attitude of HEIs towards vocational SLQs**. In many parts of Europe, it is still more difficult for applicants with a VET SLQ to be admitted to higher HEIs, in particular when applying to traditional and/or more prestigious universities. A lot more work needs to be done with HEIs to demonstrate and promote the validity of vocational SLQs for progression to higher education and higher vocational training.

- **Understanding of 'progression'.** Progression to universities is only one form of progression. Other HEIs and access to the labour market must be considered progression routes too. The visibility of pathways is an essential aspect in this context.

- **Understanding of 'HE':** There is no common understanding across countries of what is meant by HE. In the UK, every qualification above EQF level 4 will be generally considered further or HE. In Germany, the master craftsperson qualification is linked to NQF/EQF level 6, but is explicitly not considered HE.

SLQs in the context of mobility and cross-border recognition

- **The added value of NQFs in facilitating the recognition of qualifications in general, and SLQs in particular, is not well understood..** Findings from the PLA suggest that while qualifications frameworks are increasingly used for the purpose of recognising SLQs, the added value of such practice is not yet generally apparent.. Many forms of recognition still attach significant priority to grades, learning hours, institutions and programmes rather than to learning outcomes and qualification levels.

- There is no consensus of opinion on whether the **indication of EQF levels** on certificates will bring some uniformity to recognition processes

The impact of increased European cooperation and implications for EQF referencing

- **From confusing to clarified diversity.** The EQF referencing process has significantly contributed to clarifying the range of qualifications and their differences

since 2009. Both the quality and depth of cross national discussion about qualifications have been much improved. What appeared as a confusing diversity of SLQs back then can now be called a 'clarified diversity'.

- **Learning outcomes are a central element**, but must be considered in interplay with other factors (political, social, cultural, pragmatic). This will have to be taken into account on the way towards arriving at a more mature and comprehensive approaches to EQF referencing.

- **Effect of the 'European Lens'.** Looking at domestic issues with a 'European Lens' is considered a very powerful and useful tool. PLAs and feedback from others help countries to reflect on their NQF and levelling decisions.

- The ongoing work (Cedefop studies, discussions in the EQF Advisory Group and peer learning activities) on getting a better understanding of qualifications across countries is highly appreciated.

Topics to be further explored

- What impact do the NQFs have on standards? How are levels being used as a reference to look into standards and curricula?

- NQFs and their associated policies, should be developed further in order to better reflect the diversity of qualifications systems.. Transparency about how qualifications are linked to levels is of utmost importance.

- At European level, more focus should be put on the cooperation towards comparing learning outcomes, also at technical level (including the work on qualifications databases).

- The forms, functions and value of vocational school leaving qualifications that give access to first cycle higher education need to be better understood.

3   PLA ON UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL LEAVING QUALIFICATIONS – REPORT OF SURVEY FINDINGS

John O'Connor (EQF-NCP Ireland, IE) presented the main findings of a survey on upper secondary school leaving qualifications (SLQs), carried out[2] ahead of the PLA to document the current state of play regarding SLQs and their relationship with the EQF and thus provide quantitative and qualitative inputs to the PLA. The survey particularly aimed to explore the following three aspects: the NQF level of the SLQs; the processes and influences in assigning an NQF level to SLQs; and the application of qualification level of SLQs, e.g. for recognition purposes.

The survey results are based on 24 national responses provided by EQF Advisory Group members or representatives of NCPs (EQF National Coordination Points). The survey findings confirm that upper secondary school leaving qualifications – both vocational and general SLQs - primarily correspond to EQF level 4, with only very few isolated cases, where such qualifications correspond to EQF levels 3 or 5.

The survey results also highlight that the levelling process is not a purely technical process, but to a considerable extent influenced by social, political and cultural factors. The survey responses suggest that the NQF levelling process for SLQs is highly influenced by their traditional position in the qualifications system (considered 'very important' or 'important' in 88% of the responses) and by learning outcomes (83%), followed by pragmatic concerns (67%) and political factors (63%). To understand and trust the level of SLQs, it will thus be important to uncover both the technical process of 'levelling' and the socio-political influences that underpin the process.

Two thirds of the respondents (67%) indicated that the NQF/EQF level of SLQs in other countries has improved the transparency of those qualifications, and 59% agreed that the NQF/EQF level of SLQs is widely used in qualifications recognition processes in their country. Nevertheless, when asked whether HEIs use the NQF/EQF level of SLQs when considering access to first cycle degree courses, 46% of the respondents replied 'rarely' or 'never'.

John O'Connor concluded that the survey findings confirm the conclusions of previous PLAs in Tallinn (2011), Warsaw (2014) and Berlin (2015), and that they highlight the complexity around the level of comparability and the comparability of level across apparently similar qualifications.

4   TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF QUALIFICATIONS ACROSS QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Jens Bjornavold (Cedefop) provided an outline on the ongoing Cedefop study on 'The role of learning outcomes in supporting dialogue between education and training and the labour market', which was launched in 2015. The key objective of the study is – through a focus on learning outcomes – to understand the way vocational education and training qualifications are being defined, reviewed and renewed. Although the study does not particularly focus on SLQs (some of the qualifications studied also function as SLQs, though), it is the methodology applied for the comparative analysis of qualifications, which is of particular interest for the work towards a methodology for comparative analysis of qualifications across qualifications frameworks.

The study compares ten similar qualifications from ten European countries (AT, BG, DK, ES, FI, FR, IE, LT, NL, UK-EN) to gain an insight into the similarities and differences as regards their profile and content. Additionally, in cooperation with ETF and UNESCO,

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[2] The survey instrument was designed by the five NCPs (four from the UK, one from Ireland) which hosted this PLA.

additional qualifications from a series of European and non-European countries will be covered.

The comparison of qualifications is based on a set of three different templates, which have been developed for this purpose, and is carried out through desk research. The terminology used by the ESCO project (European classification of occupations, skills, competences and qualifications) serves as a reference point for the comparison. At a later stage, the findings will be reviewed in cooperation with World Skills experts.

Preliminary findings indicate that few countries structure their learning outcomes descriptions according to the knowledge/skills/competence domains. However, the majority of countries explicitly refer to and integrate knowledge, skills and competence in their descriptions. When expressing the different levels of complexity of learning outcomes ('vertical dimension'), the countries give high priority to the use of action verbs and context descriptions, and indicating the degree of autonomy and responsibility.

5   HORIZONTAL COMPARISONS OF LEVELLED QUALIFICATIONS IN NQFS

Ewa Chmielecka (Institute of Educational Research, PL) presented the methodology of an ongoing project on horizontal comparisons of levelled qualifications in NQFs (from February to December 2016). This work, undertaken by a subgroup of the EQF Advisory Group, addresses the topic of consistency of NQF levelling decisions across countries by fine-tuning and testing a methodology for the comparison of levelling decisions.

The subgroup, which is led by Poland, is composed of the EQF Advisory Group representatives and/or levelling experts from Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Norway and Sweden as well as representatives from Cedefop and the Commission.

To undertake this comparison, the project will study two specific qualifications, i.e. mechanical engineer and CNC operator. The comparative analysis of qualifications will be carried out based on a structured template for describing the qualifications. In addition to learning outcomes descriptions, the analysis will take into account the following aspects related to the context of the qualifications: access rights, purpose of the qualification in the labour market, validation and recognition practice, quality assurance procedures, purpose of the qualification in education, reference to the occupational context, reference to international standards, and the method used for levelling qualifications in a given country. Ewa Chmielecka emphasised that the consideration of context information related to the qualification is essential to this exercise to gain a better understanding of the qualifications and the national approach chosen for the levelling.

The 'horizontal comparison' exercise will thus try to clarify why seemingly similar qualifications have been assigned to different levels in different countries; and whether seemingly comparable qualifications assigned to the same level are indeed comparable. The outcomes of the project will inform and support future decisions on the levelling of national qualifications.

6   SESSION 1: 'WHY HAVE MORE THAN ONE MAJOR QUALIFICATION THAT GIVE DIRECT ACCESS TO 1ST CYCLE PROGRAMMES?'

Each of the five workshop sessions was dedicated to a specific topic related to upper secondary school leaving qualifications. Each session began with two presentations of national case studies, followed by a roundtable discussion (for sessions 1 and 4) or a plenary discussion (for sessions 2, 3 and 5).

Session 1 took a closer look at examples of countries, where more than one major qualification gives direct access to HE. Upper secondary education often includes programmes that are general and some that are vocational. These programmes form tracks

or pathways that cater for different aptitudes and ambitions of learners. These programmes are also likely to be distinct from one another. However, some countries try to remove barriers for learners who wish to change their pathway into HE, where, for example, a vocationally oriented SLQ can support entry to a general (academic) bachelor's degree.

Session 1: 'Why have more than one major qualification that give direct access to 1st cycle programmes?'	
Portugal Teresa Duarte Chaves, ANQEP	Portugal distinguishes between two types of SLQs, which are linked to different NQF/EQF levels. Both, however, provide access to first cycle HE studies: (a) upper-secondary education obtained via general education or RPL (general SLQ, NQF/EQF level 3) and (b) upper secondary education obtained via double certification pathways (VET) or RPL (vocational SLQ, NQF/EQF level 4). All learners who want to enrol in HE must take an admission exam. There is a numerus clausus system in place. HEIs rarely use the NQF/EQF level of SLQ when deciding on learners' access to first cycle degree courses. As for the factors involved in assigning an NQF level to the SLQs, learning outcomes certainly influenced the levelling, but they are only part of the story. Political factors played a role too, and the level of engagement of the social partners had an effect on the perceived level of a qualification as well. Nowadays, the NQF level of the SLQ is nationally accepted. One of the challenges related to the NQF is that some stakeholders have not fully grasped the differentiation between NQF levels 3 and 4. The social partners see value in the existence of two types of SLQ.
Latvia Baiba Ramina, Academic Information Centre	Latvia has two different types of SLQs, which are both linked to NQF/EQF level 4: (a) general secondary programmes (3 years) and (b) vocational secondary programmes (4 years). These qualifications are offered at different types of institutions. In order to graduate, learners must take a centralised exam consisting of four compulsory exams (Latvian, mathematics, a foreign language and at least one elective), and this applies to both pathways. VET graduates must take an additional VET qualification exam and graduate with a diploma of vocational secondary education and a certificate of general secondary education. Graduates from the general education pathway graduate with a certificate of general secondary education. There are two key advantages to this system. On the one hand, there is more than one pathway towards first cycle HE studies, and graduates from the VET pathway are prepared both for HE studies and direct labour market entry. On the other hand, this system also has its weaknesses. Negative assessment in either the centralised exam or the additional VET exam will prevent graduation (there are plans to issue two certificates to reduce the number of dropouts). Furthermore, fewer contact hours in general subjects lead to poorer performance of VET graduates in general subjects in the centralised exam.

Session questions:

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

Key points:

- Providing more than one SLQ can be useful in the sense that this creates more educational pathways for learners.

- Having a VET SLQ requires work on creating social recognition; qualifications frameworks can help with this. More use could be made of NQFs to show the different available educational pathways, to **improve their visibility**.

- HEIs are autonomous and tend to favour 'traditional' SLQs with a general (i.e. non-VET) focus. The fear of dropout of programmes is an important consideration in deciding how a qualification is valued by HEIs.

- The indication of an EQF level does not provide any information on whether the specific qualification provides access to HE.

- Equipping VET qualifications with the function of an SLQ, giving access to 1st cycle degree studies ('double certification') can be a way to **increase the popularity of certain VET pathways** and thus a method to counter decreasing VET enrolment figures.

- **Aspect of lifelong learning**. Upper secondary school leaving qualifications can be gained later in life and provide access to HE.

- In many cases, **NQF level descriptors** could be improved. Small changes could help open up frameworks and make them more accessible to the labour market.

Examples from countries:

- In Hungary, there is a choice of the 'grade' of the SLQ. Depending on the type of SLQ (all at the same NQF level), there will be different progression destinations.

- In Denmark, a number of different vocational qualifications can give access to first cycle qualifications. This reflects a policy priority to make VET routes more attractive; giving access to HE is one way of giving status to qualifications.

- Ireland: There is controlled access to Bachelor degrees for SLQs in VET based on a parallel scoring system to that used for general SLQs

- In Germany, different types of SLQs provide access to HE. However, they provide access to different HE destinations (e.g. 'traditional' universities vs. universities of applied sciences).

7   SESSION 2: 'WHY DO SOME MEMBER STATES NOT INCLUDE SLQS IN THEIR NQFS?

SLQs are anchor points of qualifications hierarchies. Nevertheless, some countries do not include them in their NQF. For the sake of mutual trust, it is important to understand the reasons for not including SLQs in NQFs.

Session 2: 'Why do some member states not include SLQs in their NQFs?	
France Brigitte Bouquet, CNCP	There are three types of the French 'baccalauréat': 'bac général', 'bac technologique' and 'bac professionnel'. The 'bac' is the upper secondary school leaving certificate – this applies to all three types. Graduates from all three types of 'bac' have access to HE.
	The 'bac général' has not been assigned to an NQF level, although there is general agreement that it corresponds to NQF/EQF level 4. The qualification is not defined in terms of learning outcomes, and it cannot be obtained through validation (VAE - validation des acquis de l'expérience). However, 'bac technologique' and 'bac professionnel' are both formally linked to NQF level 4 and can both be obtained

	through VAE.
	The vast majority of 'bac général' graduates enrol in some kind of HE programme (degree courses, short-cycle programmes). The 'bac technologique' is more professionally oriented and was originally designed for direct labour market entry. Nowadays, many graduates will enrol in short-cycle HE, and the number of graduates who enrol in university studies is increasing.
	The 'bac professionnel' is still more oriented towards direct labour market entry, although here as well an increasing number of graduates continue with further studies.

Session questions:

- Is the rationale for leaving SLQs out of the NQF clear?

- Is there a time when SLQs might be included?

- What are the views of social partners about the omission of SLQs?

- Does the omission of SLQs have implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

Key points:

- **Importance of context.** There is a context that dictates what an NQF looks like. This context differs significantly across countries. The more countries learn about each other's national systems, the easier it gets to understand and relate to the (levelling) decisions and the national context in which they were taken.

- **Learning outcomes remain at the core.** While there is agreement that learning outcomes alone are not sufficient to explain the levelling of a qualification and that there are extra layers to discuss, they still remain at the core. Context factors (both political, social, cultural and pragmatic) are important to consider to fully understand how qualifications are placed into NQFs. At the same time, however, delegates cautioned that 'context' should not be used as a universal explanation for all cross-country differences.

- **Cultural aspects** may also play a role in the levelling of qualifications. ('The longer you study, the better you are, and the better your job must be.')

- The understanding of the **concept of transparency** might have changed over the years/since the adoption of the EQF Recommendation.

- **'Level' as a starting point.** There are limitations to the extent to which the 'level' can explain qualifications. While the level is certainly a starting point for comparing qualifications, it is necessary to deepen the information from the level to the single qualifications. Currently, the systems are not very well designed in this way. How can the learning outcomes approach be strengthened to provide access to more in-depth information? The qualification registers will assume an important role in this.

- **EQF as an approximation.** The EQF has always been an approximation; we should try to make it the best possible approximation we can get.

Country example:

- So far, the German 'Abitur' has not been linked to an NQF level. General education in Germany is highly decentralised, with the Ministries of the Länder being fully in charge of this matter. When Germany decided to implement a comprehensive NQF, the decision was taken to postpone the levelling of the 'Abitur' for five years. With these five years now coming to an end, the Ministers of the Länder will soon have to come to an agreement of the levelling of this qualification. Discussions at national level show that the levelling of other qualifications – in particular vocational qualifications in this case – does play a role in the perceived level of the 'Abitur'.

8 SESSION 3: 'SLQS WITHIN AND ACROSS NQF LEVELS'

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

Session 3: 'SLQs within and across NQF levels'	
The Netherlands Regina Kleingeld, NLQF	The structure of the NLQF, the Dutch NQF, includes a level '4+' between level 4 and level 5. Both NLQF levels 4 and 4+ have been referenced to EQF level 4. The Dutch system offers several different SLQs that provide access to first cycle degree studies. Both MBO level 4 (VET, 3 or 4 years) and HAVO (Higher General Secondary Education, 5 years) have been linked to NLQF level 4 and provide access to Associate Degree and Professional Bachelor Studies. The VWO (pre-university education, 6 years) has been linked to NLQF level 4+ and provides access to the Associate Degree, Professional Bachelor studies, as well as University Bachelor studies. When the Netherlands first presented their EQF referencing report to the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG), the VWO qualification had been linked to NLQF/EQF level 5; a decision where the EQF AG considered the rationale provided as insufficient unless further evidence was delivered. The matter had to be reconsidered, and the Netherlands decided to introduce NLQF level 4+ for the VWO qualification to express the substantial level difference particularly in comparison to the HAVO qualification. This solution was then accepted by the Ministry, national stakeholders and the EQF AG.
Ireland John Hammond, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	The Irish case presents an example of the use of two levels for SLQs. The Irish Leaving Certificate qualification is treated as a single award spanning levels 4 and 5 of the NQF. The Leaving Certificate has a towering presence in the Irish qualifications context. It is considered as a 'social rite of passage – brutal but fair'; it enjoys public status and confidence. Whenever national exams take place, there will be intense scrutiny from the media and extensive media coverage. The decision to place the Leaving Certificate across two NQF levels is consistent with public perception. Greater definition would have a negative impact on the status of some options in schools and access to programmes. Although greater definition might benefit the framework, its relevance was not apparent to schools. At national level, the placement of the Leaving Certificate is not an issue and has never been questioned. However, it was pointed out that it might be an issue in international mobility.

Session questions:

- What is the rationale for using two levels or sub-levels, is it the case that NQFs aim to differentiate qualifications based on the 'volume' of learning outcomes in addition to the level of learning outcomes?

- Will sub-levels become separate NQF levels in time, or will the difference in the sub-levels gradually erode and mean they are no longer necessary? In the same way, could SLQs that cover two levels be allocated to one level in time?

- Is it the case that there are too few or too many levels in some NQFs?

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

Key points:

- Both the presented approaches (IE, NL) reflect the specificities of the particular national context.

- There might be some cross-national influences on national qualifications (levels), especially with SLQs. The levelling of SLQs in particular might have followed different rules than it is the case for other qualifications, reflecting a certain pressure that 'it has to be on level 4'.

- In several countries, SLQs have the role of an **anchor qualification,** playing a very significant role in the national qualifications context. The case of Ireland suggests that in some cases, the NQF might need general school leaving qualifications more than these qualifications need a qualifications framework.

- The EQF has helped to bring a '**European Lens**' to domestic issues, which makes countries reflect on certain decisions taken, e.g., on the decision to have the SLQ placed at two levels.

- Experience from several countries with NQF sublevels suggests that the introduction of sublevels can often be traced back to political factors (e.g. social partners' perspective).

- Question to be asked: What level of detail and how much comparability is exactly needed and sufficient in order to understand and trust the level of SLQs?

9   SESSION 4: 'TO WHAT EXTENT DO VOCATIONAL SLQS LEAD TO FIRST CYCLE PROGRAMMES?'

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

Session 4: 'To what extent do vocational SLQs lead to first cycle programmes?'	
Estonia Kaidi Nõmmela, Ministry of Education and Research	There are two qualifications, both linked to EstQF level 4, which provide access to first cycle degree courses, i.e. (a) the upper-secondary general education certificate and (b) the upper-secondary VET certificate. Graduation from upper secondary school (a) requires candidates to take three national exams, one school exam and a student investigation paper or practical work. With upper-secondary VET education (b), studies are completed once the learning outcomes described in the curriculum have been achieved. The national exams are optional for upper secondary VET students. As for the access to first cycle degree courses, all SLQ graduates are granted the right to continue their studies in HE, and all have an equal right to compete for admission to HEIs. HEIs are autonomous in establishing their admission requirements (e.g. may be stated as a minimum number of points achieved in the national examination, and may include an additional entrance exam, and/or a motivation letter).
UK-Scotland Aileen Ponton, SCQF Partnership & Liz Hyslop, Scottish	The SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework) has been in place for 15 years and been designed as a voluntary lifelong learning framework. It is based on a twenty-year history of outcome-based, unit-based qualifications. The SQCF is not owned by the government, but enjoys government commitment and support. There are currently over 11,000 learning programmes in the framework, with an increasing number of employer- and work-based qualifications. The recent 'Developing the Young Workforce' policy (2015) announced the future development of new

Session 4: 'To what extent do vocational SLQs lead to first cycle programmes?'	
Qualifications Authority	qualifications to promote work-based learning, e.g. a Professional Baccalaureate qualification.
	In Scotland, no specific vocational SLQ provides direct access to first cycle degree courses. The typical entry requirement is a group of SLQs at grades A-C in National Higher or Advanced Higher level (or equivalent).

Session questions:

- What are the main first cycle programmes that are commonly accessible to people holding a vocational SLQ?

- Are some first cycle programmes not accessible to people holding a vocational SLQ?

- How do HEIs evaluate vocational SLQs for admission?

- Does achieving a vocational SLQ have implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

Key points:

- In most countries, there is access – whether direct or not – to first cycle higher education studies for holders of VET SLQs.

- **Autonomous nature of HEIs**. Higher education access and admission must be separated. In most cases, HEIs are generally free to set their own admission criteria. This may lead to situations where, in practice, some vocational SLQs will be accepted by some universities for some courses (but not others).

- **Understanding of 'progression'.** Progression to universities is only one form of progression. Other HEIs and access to the labour market should be considered as progression routes too.

- **Understanding of 'HE'.** There is no common understanding across countries on what is meant by HE. In the UK, every qualification above EQF level 4 will generally be considered further or higher education. In Germany, a master craftsperson qualification is linked to NQF/EQF level 6, but is explicitly not considered HE. The concept of higher vocational education and training (HVET) is assuming importance in some countries.

- **Importance of visibility of vocational routes into HE.** It is important to create visible vocational routes for learners – whether this is through universities or other HEIs; the positioning of universities as the 'gold standard' as a progression destination for VET graduates should be questioned.

- **Attitude of HEIs towards vocational SLQs**. In many parts of Europe, it is still more difficult for applicants with a VET SLQ to be admitted to HEIs, in particular when applying to traditional and/or more prestigious universities. A lot more work needs to be done with HEIs to demonstrate and promote the validity of vocational SLQs for progression to higher education and higher vocational training.

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Country examples:

- In Lithuania, UK-Scotland and Hungary, access to first degree courses is dependent on the exams chosen in the SLQ graduation process.

- In Lithuania, graduates with a vocational SLQ are given additional points towards access to HE.

- In Ireland, HEIs may apply local arrangements within their admissions policies – where Institutes of Technology are familiar with vocational courses that have strong programmatic links to the offer within the HEI, access can be granted on this basis..

- The UK is just one example of a country, where gaining access to HE with a vocational SLQ is still often more complicated than with a general education qualification.

- In contrast to many other countries, Finland does not struggle with the attractiveness of VET. There is universal access from vocational education and training to HE. In in some areas of Finland, the popularity of certain VET pathways has made admission into VET even more competitive than admission to general education pathways.

- Some countries report that holders of VET SLQs do not perform as well in HE as holders of general education SLQs. This finding, however, cannot and should not be generalised in the absence of evidence demonstrating the relationship between qualification type used for access and subsequent performance in higher education. In Denmark, for instance, learners can access professional HE from both VET and HE pathways. Here, students with a background in general education often lack professional knowledge, while those with a VET background are not sufficiently challenged in certain vocational subjects.

10   SESSION 5: 'SLQS AND REGIONAL MOBILITY'

Countries may vary by the degree of selectivity that they operate in terms of access to HE. Some countries have more comprehensive access to HE than others. According to the Lisbon Convention on Recognition of Qualifications it has to be proven that a qualification achieved in another country must be substantially different to the home qualification if it is not accepted as an entry requirement. Additionally, specific bilateral or multilateral agreements exist between countries that state that certain SLQs from different countries may be treated in the same way as a local SLQ.

Session 5: 'SLQs and regional mobility'	
Norway Kari Berg, Ministry of Education and Research	The Norwegian system offers a variety of different pathways to HE through general and vocational education routes including a. upper secondary school leaving certificate; b. VET learners who have completed the second year of an education may transfer to a third year that qualifies for HE admission, instead of a two-year apprenticeship period; c. upper secondary VET qualification (craft or journeyman's certificate), and successful completion of six general education subjects (called the 'six pack'); d. applicants aged 23 or above with at least five years of work experience and successful completion of the 'six pack' subjects; and e. admission to selected HE courses for holders of a craft or journeyman's certificate. In Norway, learners who wish to enrol in HE, do not apply to the HEIs directly. Instead, the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS) coordinates the admission to ordinary undergraduate study programmes at all universities, university colleges and some private university colleges. The Nordic agreement on admission to HE, first signed in 1996, aims to ensure free movement of students between the Nordic countries (DK, FI, IS, SE, NO, and Faroe Islands, Greenland and Aaland). The agreement does not refer to EQF or NQF. It states that participating countries have the mutual obligation to grant applicants with residence in another Nordic country admission to public HE courses on equivalent terms as to applicants from their own country.
Luxembourg	There are several pathways, both from secondary and technical secondary education, which may grant access to HE. The secondary school leaving certificate

Session 5: 'SLQs and regional mobility'	
Joseph Noesen, Ministère de l'Education nationale, de l'Enfance et de la jeunesse	is generally recognised for access to the University of Luxembourg and foreign universities (automatic recognition or based on Lisbon Recognition Convention). The same applies to the technical secondary school leaving certificate, with some restrictions: some foreign universities will only grant access to programmes from the same field of learning.
	Holders of the technician's diploma and the vocational aptitude diploma can access the University of Luxembourg under specific conditions (additional modules in general subjects to be taken; same field of study). For access to foreign universities, the learning outcomes have to be 'translated' into points, as these diplomas do not show any grades.
	To most foreign universities, the secondary school-leaving certificate is well known and there are no problems related to recognition. No use is made of NQFs for these recognition purposes.

Session questions:

- To what extent are SLQs facilitating cross border access to first cycle qualifications?

- How are SLQs evaluated by HEIs and ENIC-NARIC bodies?

- What is the role of existing agreements between countries on the comparability and acceptability of SLQs?

- If an SLQ from a country is not included in their NQF (and therefore does not have an EQF level) or an international agreement, are there implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

Key points:

- **NQFs may not be ready for use in recognition,** because the use of learning outcomes is not sufficiently advanced. Outcomes from a recent PLA in Luxembourg on the topic of recognition suggest that qualifications frameworks are very rarely used for recognition purposes and that they are of very limited use in this context. There is still too much focus on grades, learning hours and programmes rather than on learning outcomes. Thus, further work will be needed on the learning outcomes.

- **Limited mobility of learners with vocational SLQs:** Some countries report low levels of mobility of VET learners. At least to some extent, this appears to be linked to a lack of information about pathways, qualifications and possibilities for recognition. Improved provision of information (e.g. contact points) might be needed.

- There is no unanimous agreement on whether the **indication of EQF levels** on certificates will bring some uniformity to recognition processes.

11   CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE REFERENCING

Aileen Ponton (SCQF Partnership, UK-Scotland) reflected on the key discussion points during this PLA. She emphasised that the sharing and understanding of practices across countries is hugely important – both for the EQF referencing process, but also to reflect on one's own national system and NQF. The progress that has been made over the past years in terms of European cooperation highlights that sometimes it just takes time to understand a qualification. As for vocational upper secondary school leaving qualifications, discussions at the PLA have made it obvious that they would require better promotion in many countries and a better explanation of the progression possibilities that they offer.

Jens Bjørnavold (Cedefop) added that the EQF referencing process has significantly contributed to clarifying the diversity of qualifications since 2009. What appeared as a confusing diversity of SLQs back then can now be called a 'clarified diversity'.

It has become apparent, and the PLAs have made a significant contribution to this, that learning outcomes are a central element. However, they must be considered in interplay with other factors (political, social, cultural, pragmatic). This will have to be taken into account on the way towards arriving at a more mature and comprehensive approaches to EQF referencing.

Further reflections will be required on the role of the NQFs in levelling and transparency. NQFs must be further developed in order to able to better reflect the diversity of qualifications. Transparency on how qualifications are linked to levels is of utmost importance.

At European level, more focus should be put on the cooperation towards comparing learning outcomes, also at technical level (including the work on qualifications databases).

It is important to keep in mind that the topic of progression not only refers to access to universities, but also to access into higher professional education and into the labour market. The visibility of pathways is an essential aspect in this context.

Susanne Lonscher-Räcke (European Commission) emphasised the purpose of the PLAs, as providing a platform of exchange for countries and promoting the further implementation of the EQF, stating that it is usually not feasible to get into this depth of discussion on a certain topic at an EQF Advisory Group meeting.

It became apparent throughout the PLA that NQFs need to be adapted to national circumstances but that the rationale of levelling decisions needs to be made clear to other countries to support trust and to foster cross-country mobility. Two questions might be worth further exploring in this particular context: if the general SLQ is considered as an anchor qualification what is the added value of including SLQs in an NQF, emphasising the importance of comprehensive frameworks? What is the actual value of the SLQs given that many countries have additional HE entrance exams in place, how can permeability be achieved?

A recent PLA discussed how ENIC-NARICs deal with the skills and competences of refugees. A lot could be learned from these practices, and more exchange of experience would be valuable and fruitful. Furthermore, the ongoing work of the EQF AG subgroup on horizontal comparisons and the Cedefop project on comparison of qualifications are expected to contribute to improving the EQF referencing process, allowing it to develop a more in-depth approach and achieve further consistency and trust.

ANNEX A – AGENDA

Final programme
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