

Preparation of self-certification reports within the Bologna Process

Guidelines, observations, and recommendations

This report was prepared in the terms of the activities of the QUATRA – TPG A Working Group on Self-Certification.

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List of abbreviations

- BFUG – Bologna Follow-up Group
- ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
- EHEA – European Higher Education Area
- ENIC – European Network of Information Centres in the European Region
- EQF – European Qualifications Framework
- EQF AG – EQF Advisory Group
- ESG – The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- ETF – European Training Foundation
- HE – higher education
- HEI – higher education institution
- NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union
- NQF – National Qualifications Framework
- PLA – peer learning activity
- QF – Qualifications Framework
- QUATRA – TPG A – Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A
- TPG A – EHEA Thematic Peer Group A on Qualifications Framework
- VET – vocational education and training
- WG – Working Group

Introduction

In September 2018, the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) formally established the Thematic Peer Group A on Qualifications Framework (TPG A) – more specifically on Key Commitment 1: a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching frameworks of the EHEA and first and second cycle degrees scaled by ECTS. The Working Group on Self-Certification was established in 2022 per request of the member countries of TPG A. The Working Group on Self-Certification is comprised of eight member countries: Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria (co-chair), Croatia, Georgia (co-chair), Greece, Kazakhstan, and Latvia. This report was prepared by the TPG A Working Group on Self-Certification.

Qualifications systems and qualifications should be transparent and quality assured so that key stakeholders including learners and employers have trust in them. The same approach should be practiced at the policy level to duly prepare the self-certification reports and ensure that they are transparent, up-to-date and quality assured via the review process and consultation with stakeholders. The Working Group on Self-Certification provided a platform for discussion on the Bologna Process Self-Certification mechanism and the exchange of experiences among countries.

In December 2022 to January 2023, the Working Group on Self-Certification conducted a survey of TPG A members to collect their experience and best practices on the self-certification process on compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA. The survey was filled both by those countries, which have undergone the self-certification process, and those, which have not conducted the self-certification process yet. These different sets of experiences gathered during the survey served as evidence for developing these recommendations on the self-certification process. The results and findings of the survey are outlined in the Annex 1. As the main conclusions of the survey could be summarised:

- Guidelines on self-certification criteria content and procedure should be developed;
- Peer support activities such as thematic seminars, discussions are very welcome to continue;
- Platform for self-certification report presentation and discussion is needed;
- Increase publicity of self-certification reports and all related information (EHEA website) is recommended;
- Periodic update of the self-certification report is necessary.

According to the results of the survey, current situation in self-certification reviews and reports is not fully satisfactory; therefore, having more discussions on this topic should make information and guidance on self-certification more available by reviewing the QF-EHEA criteria to improve their clarity and support other countries in initiating and completing their self-certification process. These recommendations, which are addressed at EHEA member countries, BFUG and the ENIC/NARIC network, impart the following aspects:

- Updating criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA;
- Development and publication of procedure for the self-certification process, e.g., in the form of BFUG note or recommendation;
- Updating the self-certification reports, i.e. whether or how often the reports should be updated;

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- Development guidance material for international experts providing support in self-certification process, which includes their review of the self-certification report and statement;
- Recommendations for EHEA member countries on the steps within the self-certification process;
- Recommendations for EHEA member countries on the involvement of international experts;
- Recommendations on the structure of the self-certification report.

The Working Group operated and the report was elaborated in the framework of Erasmus+ project “Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A” ([QUATRA – TPG A](#)). The aim of the project is to enhance cooperation between national authorities, members of Thematic Peer Group A on QF and stakeholders in developing common European standards for quality and transparency and to ensure the fulfilment of the key commitments that are essential for the functioning of the EHEA.

Recommendations

The following recommendations regarding the self-certification process are presented based on the input from TPG A members. The contribution was gathered through a dedicated survey, meetings, online consultations, and during a Peer Learning Activity on Self-Certification held in Tbilisi on September 28, 2023, as part of TPG A work programme.

The document distinguishes recommendations for: a) EHEA member countries, b) BFUG and c) the ENIC/NARIC network.

Recommendations for EHEA member countries

Recommendations on the steps within the self-certification process

1. Understanding the requirements and expectations of the self-certification process, as well as understanding the role of different bodies and institutions at the national level.
2. Setting the aims of the self-certification process, and if relevant making a decision on whether the self-certification process will be aligned with the referencing process.
3. Informing the EHEA bodies (if self-certification is prepared jointly with the referencing report – also EQF Advisory Group) about launching the process.
4. Establishing the national coordination committee (task force responsible for the management of the process) and setting their mandate and tasks in the self-certification process.
5. Setting the envisaged timeline of the self-certification process and key steps.
6. Allocating appropriate resources (human and financial) for the implementation of the process.
7. Conducting initial analysis of correspondence of HE national qualifications framework with QF-EHEA and consultations with the national stakeholders.
8. Conducting analysis and taking decision whether one report (both for the qualifications framework of higher education and national qualifications framework) or two separate reports are prepared. *Note: joint report may facilitate consistency between various education sectors, comparability of qualifications and accessibility to learning; however, the self-certification process should be clearly distinguished in the report.*
9. Composing the self-certification report in cooperation with the national stakeholders and international experts, including a clear description on criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA. *See the proposed structure of the self-certification report below.*
10. Ensuring transparency of the self-certification process at national level and publishing the results of self-certification (the report).
11. Submitting the self-certification report to the BFUG secretariat and if relevant to EQF Advisory Group.
12. Updating the self-certification report every 5-7 years or sooner if significant changes are introduced into national higher education systems.

Recommendations on the involvement of international experts

1. In order to ensure a broader perspective on the process, at least two or three international experts should be involved in the self-certification process.
2. The squad of international experts (i.e., their number, expertise and country of origin) and the extent of their involvement in the self-certification process should reflect the objectives and needs of the country towards the self-certification process.
3. The international experts should provide an objective and unbiased assessment of the compatibility of the qualifications framework of HE with the QF-EHEA.
4. The international experts are expected to present their opinions regarding the fulfilment of each criterion and procedure for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA.
5. The international experts should be involved, at the earliest possible stage of the work on the self-certification process, for them to adequately assess not only the self-certification report, but also the self-certification process. However, the international experts should not influence any national decisions about the development of the qualifications framework or self-certification process.
6. The self-certification report should explicitly include statements from the international experts on the report and the self-certification process addressing each criterion and procedure for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA.
7. The self-certification report should clearly demonstrate what was the role of international experts in the self-certification process, what was the rationale for their engagement and at what stage of the work on the self-certification they were involved.
8. The international experts should have a deep understanding of higher education systems, both in their own country and internationally, should be familiar with the development, implementation, and maintenance of qualifications frameworks, Bologna Process. The international experts may come from countries that share similar features of the education and/or qualifications systems, but also from countries with very different organisations of education systems.

Recommendations on the structure of the self-certification report

Countries that participated in the project provided the following content as mandatory for the self-certification report:

1. Introduction (e.g., purpose of the report, outline of the self-certification process)
2. Comprehensive description of the HE system including, e.g.:
 - Landscape (scheme) of higher education system with further pathways
 - Higher education bodies, their governance and financing
 - Higher education legal framework
 - Types of higher education institutions
 - Admission requirements
 - Learning outcomes and cycle descriptors

- Comparison of national qualifications with the Dublin descriptors (and if necessary, with the EQF level descriptors)
 - Credit system
 - Diploma Supplement (legal provisions, structure, reference to EQF/QF-EHEA)
 - Quality assurance system
 - Implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention
 - Validation of non-formal and informal learning
 - EHEA values within the national higher education system (e.g., academic autonomy, academic freedom, academic integrity, participation of students in governance of the higher education systems)
 - Social dimensions (e.g., students with special needs, underrepresenting groups, tuition fees, students' mental health, stakeholders' rights and responsibilities)
3. Description of criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of national qualifications framework of HE with the QF-EHEA
 4. International experts' review statements
 5. Statement(-s) of the relevant QA agency or QA agencies
 6. Letter of Endorsement from approving body (if relevant in terms of national legislation)

Recommendations for BFUG

Updating criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA¹

The criteria and procedures were developed in 2005. Since then, important development has taken place, including the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. These developments should be included in the wording of the process and verification criteria. The proposals for the amendments to the wording of the criteria and procedures are outlined below.

Criteria

- 1) The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.
- 2) There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the **QF-EHEA**.
- 3) The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes, and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.
- 4) The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.

¹ Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005). A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area 2005. See: http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/WG_Frameworks_qualification/71/0/050218_QF_EHEA_580710.pdf.

- 5) The national quality assurance system for higher education refers to the national framework of qualifications and is consistent with the **ESG**.
- 6) The national framework, and any alignment with the **QF-EHEA**, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.
- 7) The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

Procedures

- 1) The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the **QF-EHEA**.
- 2) The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question, **which follow the ESG** (i.e., QA agencies that have been confirmed to follow the ESG).
- 3) The self-certification process shall involve international experts.
- 4) The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out.
- 5) The **BFUG secretariat and ENIC/NARIC** networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process.
- 6) The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the **QF-EHEA**.

Development and publication of procedure for the self-certification process, for example, in the form of BFUG note or recommendation

The note would ensure that all the member countries follow a similar process and format. This would not only enhance the process of preparation of the self-certification from the perspective of member country, but also it would be easier for external reviewers (experts) and other member countries to understand, evaluate, and compare the self-certification reports of different countries. EQF Advisory Group notes, in particular EQF AG Note 43-4 and Note 54-3, might serve as sources of inspiration.

The proposed **the procedure of the submission of the self-certification report** is summarised below:

- A country submits the composed and nationally approved self-certification report to the BFUG Secretariat.
- The BFUG Secretariat forwards the self-certification report to the Council of Europe and to the National Correspondents Network of QF-EHEA.
- After the National Correspondents Network of QF-EHEA has had time to get acquainted with the written report, the country presents the report to the meeting of the National Correspondents Network.

- The purpose of the presentation of the report is to facilitate transparency of national qualifications frameworks and systems of higher education and ensure platform for peer learning and exchanging good practices between the EHEA countries.
- The country submits the presented self-certification report to the BFUG Secretariat for publishing on the EHEA website.

Updating the self-certification reports

Based on the discussions within the TPG A, self-certification reports should be updated when major changes are implemented in the national higher education systems, but not later than 5-7 years.

Development guidance material for international experts providing support in self-certification process, which includes their review of the self-certification report and statement.

Recommendations for ENIC/NARIC network

Providing integrated and updated information about the self-certification on the ENIC/NARIC website is highly important to ensure transparency and recognition.

The ENIC/NARIC website provides useful information about the self-certification reports and process². The host of ENIC/NARIC website should invite the network member countries to regularly update and improve information about their NQFs and relevant reports.

² <https://www.enic-naric.net/page-framework-qualifications-europe-and-north-america-region>

Chapter 1. Resources and approach used to prepare the report

Multiple sources have been used to produce this report.

Firstly, the project collected information via conducting survey and number of meetings and seminars. The survey was used to collect the experience and best practices of TPG A F members on the self-certification process on compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA. Besides, the survey was filled by the TPG A member countries that have not conducted the self-certification process yet. These countries provided information on the major challenges and emerging needs for the self-certification process.

The questionnaire was sent to all members of TPG A on December 16, 2022. The questionnaire consisted of two parts:

- (1) Lessons learned from the NQF self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have completed the self-certification process.
- (2) Key challenges related to the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have not completed the self-certification process.

In total 16 countries sent their responses including (1) countries which have completed the self-certification process: Albania, Austria, Croatia, Flemish Community of Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, North Macedonia, Poland and Romania; (2) countries which have the self-certification in their policy agenda: Azerbaijan, Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Georgia. The findings of the survey are included in Annex 1 of this report.

Secondly, an analysis of the existing international documents and literature was used. In particular the following references should be mentioned:

- Ministerial conferences and communiqués, particularly, those issued after 2005: Rome (2020), Paris (2018), Yerevan (2015), Bucharest (2012), Budapest/Vienna (2010), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), London (2007), Bergen (2005)
- Self-certification reports and referencing reports prepared by the countries within EHEA and EQF processes
- Notes of the meetings of National Correspondents within Qualifications Frameworks European Higher Education Area
- EQF Advisory Group notes related to the referencing process and updating referencing.
- *Study of self-certification reports on the compatibility of national qualifications frameworks with the overarching qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area* conducted by Mile Dželalija and Bryan Maguire within the works of the Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation, Education Department of the Council of Europe, denoted further in the report as: Dželalija and Maguire (2016).
- *Aligning National against European Qualifications Frameworks: The Principles of Self-Certification*. Official Bologna Conference the London – Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve work programme. Organised by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in co-operation with the Council of Europe. Tbilisi State University, November

27-28, 2008. Final report prepared by Věra Šťastná, General Rapporteur. Denoted further in the report as Šťastná (2008).

- *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice 2012*, report prepared by: Carita Blomqvist, Tony Donohoe, Maria Kelo, Karin Järplid Linde, Rafael Llavori, Bryan Maguire, David Metz, Teresa Sanchez within the work of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- *The report by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2005* (Chair: Mogens Berg)
- *The report by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2007* (Chair: Mogens Berg)
- *Bologna Process Coordination Group for Qualifications Framework Report on Qualifications Frameworks Submitted to the BFUG for Its Meeting on February 12-13, 2009* Directorate General IV: Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport (Directorate of Education and Languages – Higher Education and Research Division). Denoted further in the report as BFUG (2009).

Thirdly, the recommendations were presented and discussed during the TPG A PLA on Self-Certification in Tbilisi held on 28 September 2023. This PLA provided very useful comments and discussions in drafting this report.

The report is targeted at EHEA members, including decision-makers, to enhance their work on the self-certification and the referencing process. The report and recommendations also aim to support the Bologna Process working structures (BFUG and TPG A) and ENIC/NARIC network.

During the discussions among the TPG A members, the conclusion was drawn that some useful materials related to the self-certification processes are not known to stakeholders and are dispersed over different web pages and sources – this especially regards procedures related to self-certification process. For that reason, references were collected to the relevant and useful materials prepared within the EHEA process, Council of Europe, EQF AG, projects, and other initiatives (see Annex 3). The structure of the report reflects the outcomes of the survey and conducted discussions between the project partners.

Chapter 2. Self-certification within the Bologna Process

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a collaborative effort among 49 European countries with the goal of creating a more comparable, compatible, and cohesive higher education system across Europe. The primary objective of this initiative is to harmonise academic degree standards and quality assurance standards across participating countries, thus facilitating the mobility of students and HE staff across European borders.

The Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) is a reference system that aims to support the process of recognition and transparency of the higher education qualifications across the countries participating in the Bologna Process. The QF-EHEA was adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 during the Bergen Conference. The framework consisted of three main cycles of higher education (Bachelor, Master, and Doctor), each with defined outcomes and associated with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits; since 2018, the short-cycle qualification has been also added to the QF-EHEA as a stand-alone qualification.

Each country participating in the Bologna Process is responsible for developing its own national qualifications framework for higher education in alignment with the QF-EHEA, which means that a degree awarded in one country would be comparable to a similar degree in another country within the EHEA. This strengthens international transparency and recognition of qualifications as well as the international mobility of learners and graduates.

In 2007, the Bologna Process Ministerial meeting in London decided that the compliance of each NQF for higher education with QF-EHEA should be asserted through a self-certification process.

A self-certification report is a document produced by NQF authority that demonstrates their qualifications framework is compatible with the QF-EHEA. The self-certification process is essential for ensuring that qualifications across the EHEA are comparable and recognised across borders.

Parallel to the QF-EHEA, the European Union has adopted a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), which covers all education levels in an eight-tiered framework. Although the EQF is not part of QF-EHEA self-certification process, the countries often present self-certification reports within the referencing reports and those two reports are being submitted jointly. Therefore, in this document, some observations were also included related to the referencing process within the EQF.

The process of self-certification is based on criteria and procedures that were developed by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks. These criteria and procedures were presented at the Bologna meeting in Bergen in 2005 and were later adopted by the ministers of higher education at the Bologna meeting in London in 2007. The criteria and procedures consist of seven verification criteria that establish compatibility between the NQF for HE and the QF-EHEA, as well as six procedures that guide the self-certification process.

Criteria (Bergen 2005, adopted in London 2007)

Original text of the criteria (2005)	Proposed text (2023)
1. The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.	No changes necessary.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.	There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the QF-EHEA .
3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes, and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.	No changes necessary.
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.	No changes necessary.
5. The national quality assurance system for higher education refers to the national framework of qualifications and is consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqués agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process.	The national quality assurance system for higher education refers to the national framework of qualifications and is consistent with the ESG . [maybe Paris Communiqué[?]]
6. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.	The national framework, and any alignment with the QF-EHEA , is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.
7. The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.	No changes necessary.

The criteria are used to evaluate the alignment of NQF with the QF-EHEA; thus, ensuring the mutual recognition and compatibility of qualifications across the EHEA. As indicated in the Danish self-certification report, “the purpose of the verification criteria is not to ensure a complete match, but rather to ascertain the compatibility and consistency between the cycle descriptors of the NQF and the QF-EHEA” (EVA, 2009).

Procedures (Bergen 2005, adopted in London 2007)

Original text of the procedures (2005)	Proposed text (2023)
1. The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.	The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the QF-EHEA .
2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process.	The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question, which follow ESG . <i>[QA agencies that have been confirmed to follow ESG]</i>
3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts.	No changes necessary.
4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out.	No changes necessary. Is this about self-certification report?
5. The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process.	The EHEA secretariat and ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process.
6. The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.	The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the QF-EHEA .

The detailed explanation of the verification and process criteria are included in the BFUG (2007) report “National Qualifications Frameworks Development and Certification”.

By following these process criteria, countries can ensure that their self-certification process is thorough, transparent, and inclusive, thereby facilitating the recognition and comparability of qualifications across the EHEA. As indicated in the Danish self-certification report, “The purpose of the process criteria is to ensure that the self-certification process is conducted by the competent national authorities in cooperation with unbiased international experts, as well as to ensure that the results of the self-certification process are made publicly available to relevant stakeholders, such as students, employers, trade unions, higher education institutions and the ENIC/NARIC network and Bologna partners” (EVA, 2009).

Chapter 3. Key bodies and institutions involved in the self-certification process

There are a number of key institutions and bodies involved in the self-certification process.

- **Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)** – the executive structure that supports the Bologna Process between the Ministerial Conferences. It oversees the implementation of the Bologna Process and is responsible for the preparation of the ministerial meetings. The BFUG is made up of 49 representatives (countries) from all the EHEA member countries and the European Commission. To become a member of the EHEA, countries have to be party to the European Cultural Convention and declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education.
- **European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Conferences** – meetings held every two or three years where ministers responsible for higher education from the EHEA countries come together to discuss the progress and future development of the EHEA. Every conference usually concludes with the publication of an official communiqué or declaration that summarises the discussions, decisions, and future action lines for the EHEA.
- **Council of Europe** – an international organisation focused on promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Europe. It has played a significant role in the Bologna Process by contributing to the development of key documents. In 2007, ministers asked the Council of Europe to take responsibility for coordinating the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks. This request was renewed in 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué. In Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, ministers also acknowledged the importance of NQFs in the implementation of lifelong learning. Since 2007, the Council of Europe has chaired the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks as well as the network of national correspondents (see Blomqvist, 2012). The Council of Europe is also keeper of the evidence from the self-certification processes and the self-certification reports are published on the ENIC/NARIC website (BFUG, 2007).
- **European Commission** – the executive branch of the European Union, which plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and the EHEA by providing funding, political support, and coordination.
- **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)** – an association of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA. The ENQA promotes European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education and disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and to foster the European dimension of quality assurance.
- **National Information Centre (ENIC or ENIC/NARIC)** – an entity established by each Party to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention-LRC), in accordance with its Article IX.2(1). The national information

centre reports to its respective national competent authority (Ministry of Education or similar body) as a Party to the LRC. Upon request, the national information centre may provide information to UNESCO and the Council of Europe, in their role as Co-Secretariats of the LRC, but also to the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (LRCC). The status and mandate of the national information centre is determined by the respective national competent authority. However, a national information centre should abide by LRC provisions, including the 2004 Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services, and the 2019 Guidelines for National Online Information Systems.

In the self-certification process the **ENIC/NARIC** network plays an essential role in ensuring the quality and credibility of the self-certification process of the qualifications frameworks of the EHEA as well as dissemination of its results, as the self-certification reports are uploaded on the web-page of national bodies responsible for the NQF management and development, ENIC/NARIC website³.

ENIC/NARIC centres have expertise in the education systems of their own countries as well as other countries. They can provide advice and guidance on the compatibility of a country's qualifications framework with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA. This would help in ensuring that a NQF is developed in line with the agreed-upon standards and criteria.

The EHEA and Bologna Process involve many other stakeholders, including national governments, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, student organisations as well as international organisations such as EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) in the self-certification process.

³ <https://www.enic-naric.net/> and European Union Portal https://european-union.europa.eu/index_en

Chapter 4. Designing self-certification process – overview the key steps

As indicated in the section above, the self-certification report is a critical aspect of the EHEA, as it requires countries to demonstrate that their national frameworks for higher education qualifications are compatible with the overarching QF-EHEA. Preparing a self-certification report involves several key considerations, including alignment with QF-EHEA level descriptors, EHEA guidelines and recommendations, stakeholder engagement, quality assurance, recognition of prior learning, transparency, legal and political considerations, documentation, external evaluation, follow-up actions, and methodology.

The rationale behind the self-certification process is to establish trust and transparency among EHEA countries and to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across borders. By undertaking the self-certification process, countries can assure other EHEA members that their national qualifications framework is in line with the agreed-upon standards, thereby making it easier for their students and staff to move between institutions and countries. This, in turn, helps in creating a more integrated, harmonised higher education area across boarder.

Having a self-certification process that is aligned with the goals of the EHEA ensures that the qualifications are recognised not only within the EHEA but also globally. This enhances the attractiveness and competitiveness of the higher education systems.

Based on the discussions conducted within the TPG A, the following steps were indicated that might be worth considering when designing the process of the preparation of self-certification reports:

1. Understanding the requirements and expectations of the self-certification process, as well as understanding the role of different bodies and institutions at the global level

Before starting the process, it is important to fully understand the aims and requirements of the self-certification process. This particularly relates to understanding the criteria and procedures for self-certification outlined in the official documents of the EHEA and the key bodies and institutions at national and international levels involved in the process.

2. Setting the aims of the self-certification process, and if necessary, making a decision on whether the self-certification process will be aligned with the referencing process

The self-certification process should have identified aims. Some countries introduced reforms before the start of the self-certification process. Therefore, the report was seen as a transparency tool for other countries to show and prove alignment of the national system with the QF-EHEA. However, in some other countries launching the self-certification process aimed to improve the higher education system and planned to introduce legislative and organisational changes. In this latter case, the planning of the self-certification process had a much longer time horizon and requested more resources.

For example, in Poland the process started as early as 2005 and lasted until 2013 when the self-certification report, along with the referencing report, was developed. These two reports were composed jointly and were accompanied by a profound change in formal education (general,

VET, HE) as well as changes in the regulation of non-formal education. Also, as noted by Dželalija and Maguire (2016), countries that have already self-certified their qualifications systems to the QF-EHEA confirm that the self-certification process is an opportunity to bring coherence to quality assurance arrangements – this is possible because all of the main quality assurance bodies have been involved in self-certification processes.

These questions should be considered at the beginning of the process. At this initial stage, consultations with international experts and European bodies such as BFUG, Council of Europe or EQF AG might be useful.

When discussing the aims of the self-certification process, it is important to reflect on whether it should be linked with the referencing process to the EQF.

Most countries in recent years have submitted self-certification reports within the EQF process. Since 2017 additional opportunities emerged for countries within EHEA but outside the EQF process – as the process of comparing third countries' national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF has been launched by the European Commission and the EQF AG. So far, five non-EU member countries compared their systems with the EQF, namely, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Ukraine and Cape Verde⁴.

As pointed out by Dželalija and Maguire (2016, p. 6): “In more recent years as EQF referencing processes have become well established, those countries involved in both processes generally find it beneficial and efficient to combine EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification processes, leading to a joint report. In such cases it is still important to take into account both sets of criteria and procedures (EQF and QF-EHEA) explicitly and separately. The self-certification process and referencing process do not have exactly the same aims or intended audiences. Higher education stakeholders and experts should be vigilant when the processes are combined to ensure that the EHEA dimension is properly addressed (...) Technical fulfilment of only the EQF referencing criteria does not guarantee at the same time the fulfilment of all QF-EHEA self-certification criteria and procedures. Similarly, fulfilment of QF-EHEA criteria and procedures does not guarantee automatic fulfilment of all EQF criteria even in respect to the HE element of the national framework”.

3. Informing the European bodies

A country willing to submit the self-certification report should inform BFUG in the case of self-certification and EQF AG in the case of joint reports about the decision to start the process.

4. Establishment of the national coordination committee (task force)

Setting up a national coordination committee or working group responsible for preparing the self-certification report. This committee should include representatives from all relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and student organisations. This ensures that the self-certification process is informed by a wide range of expertise and knowledge, which is crucial for its success.

A national coordination committee ensures a coordinated approach to the self-certification process. It brings together representatives from various stakeholders, including higher

⁴ <https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2023-02/Comparison%20report%20final%20rev%2023-02-2023%20EN.pdf>

education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and relevant government departments, to work together towards a common goal.

The establishment of a national coordination committee creates a sense of accountability among all stakeholders involved in the self-certification process. It ensures that everyone is held responsible for their part in the process, and it provides a mechanism for oversight and monitoring.

The self-certification process can be complex and challenging. A national coordination committee provides a platform for addressing any challenges that may arise during the process and for finding solutions.

Having a national coordination committee in place helps in building trust among all stakeholders involved in the self-certification process. It provides assurance that the process is being carried out in a coordinated, transparent, and accountable manner.

At the preparatory stage, a glossary of key terms establishing is useful, this is particularly important if a country plans to work jointly on the self-certification report and the referencing report. A glossary of key terms ensures that all stakeholders, both within and outside the country, have a clear and consistent understanding of the terms used in the report. Clear definitions of key terms facilitate effective communication among all stakeholders involved in the self-certification process. This is crucial for ensuring a smooth and efficient process. Both Dželalija and Maguire (2016) as well as Štátná (2008) indicate the importance glossary clarity of terms in self-certification and referencing processes.

5. Estimate the envisaged timeline of the self-certification process and key steps

Establishing a timeline and identifying key steps in the self-certification report is important for ensuring efficient project management, creating accountability, enhancing transparency, ensuring quality assurance, allocating resources efficiently, monitoring progress, and facilitating the recognition of the NQF.

As indicated in the survey report (see Annex 1) by numerous countries, the self-certification process was a comprehensive and extended process, which included several stages and measures such as: evaluation of the compatibility of NQF with the self-certification criteria and evidence collection, recommendations on the development and implementation of the legislative and methodological changes for the verification with the QF-EHEA self-certification criteria, engagement of the international experts and capacity building activities for stakeholders. The self-certification process requires the time and dedication of many stakeholders, and countries have to invest important efforts in developing the self-certification report.

Some countries conducted self-certification process along with the referencing process which made the report preparation process even more complex, as this requested the countries' analysis/reporting on compatibility of QFs of all sub-sectors of the education system with the QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF referencing criteria (e.g. Albania, Croatia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland).

Establishing a timeline and identification of key steps helps in organising and managing the self-certification process more efficiently. It provides a roadmap for all stakeholders involved in the process, ensuring that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and deadlines. A clear timeline and identified key steps create a sense of accountability among all stakeholders

involved in the self-certification process. It provides a clear set of expectations and deadlines that must be met, ensuring that all stakeholders take their responsibilities seriously. Naturally, the timeline is changing along the process, but still the set schedule would assist all the stakeholders, including external reviewers and the public, understanding and following the progress. A well-defined timeline and key steps ensure that all aspects of the self-certification process are thoroughly planned and executed. This helps in maintaining the quality and credibility of the process and the final report.

6. Allocation of appropriate resources

Organisation of the self-certification process requires financial and organisational resources for several reasons. Firstly, a detailed analysis and comparison of the national qualifications framework and the EHEA framework might need to be conducted. This might involve more thorough research, data collection, and analysis, all of which require financial resources. Secondly, engaging a wide range of stakeholders (including higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and student and staff representatives) often involves organising meetings, consultations, or workshops. These activities require financial resources for logistics, travel, and accommodation. Also, preparation of the report and dissemination of its effects require resources, such as print, management of website, engagement of international experts and others.

Some countries participating in the self-certification and/or referencing process indicated that this process was supported financially and organisationally by dedicated projects financed from European Union funds. For instance, Hungary completed all steps of the self-certification process within the framework of the EU-funded project “Both self-referencing and self-certification were carried out in the framework of an EU-funded national project to develop and implement the NQF (referred to as Hungarian Qualifications Framework, HuQF)”.

7. Conducting initial analysis of correspondence of national qualifications framework with QF-EHEA and consultations with the national stakeholders

Analysing existing discrepancies between the NQF and the QF-EHEA is an important step in preparing self-certification reports within the EHEA. This involves a detailed comparison of the level descriptors, learning outcomes, and quality assurance processes of the national framework with those of the QF-EHEA.

At this step, the collection of evidence may be organised. As indicated in the BFUG (2007) report, an important element in fulfilling the verification and process criteria is providing succinct background analytical and systemic information, initially on a draft basis and, following consultation and further amendment, as part of the final report.

Once the differences between the QFs have been identified, an action plan needs to be developed to address these issues. This could involve revising the NQF, improving quality assurance processes, or developing new systems for the recognition of prior learning. In some countries based on the conducted gap analysis proposals of amendment of legal act were proposed within higher education area.

At this stage, the engagement of the national stakeholders in these discussions is highly important and using the expertise of international experts might be considered.

This step is essential for ensuring that the NQF is compatible with the QF-EHEA and for preparing a robust self-certification report.

8. Preparation of a report with the involvement of stakeholders and international experts

Based on the findings of the initial analysis and consultation with national stakeholders and possibly with international experts, a draft self-certification report can be prepared. This report should include a detailed description of the NQF, an analysis of its compatibility with the QF-EHEA, and evidence to support this analysis. The report should also describe the methodology used for the self-certification process and any challenges encountered.

When drafting the report, all the relevant stakeholders have to be consulted with and their feedback should be gathered. This may include conducting public consultations, organising workshops or seminars, or circulating the draft report for written comments.

Provision of evidence in the self-certification report on the alignment with each self-certification criteria is of particular value. It is very important that the report is clear which solutions are functioning in practice and which are in implementation plans. See more about the international experts' role in the Chapter 6.

9. Submission of the report

Until now, the countries used to submit the reports to the BFUG and publish the document on the ENIC/NARIC website.

The TPG A has developed more detailed procedure for the submission of the self-certification report, which is proposed below:

- A country submits the composed and nationally approved self-certification report to the BFUG Secretariat.
- The BFUG Secretariat forwards the self-certification report to the Council of Europe and to the National Correspondents Network of QF-EHEA.

After the National Correspondents Network of QF-EHEA has had time to get acquainted with the written report, the country delivers presentation of the report to the meeting of the National Correspondents Network. The purpose of the presentation of the report is to facilitate transparency of national qualifications frameworks and systems of higher education and ensure platform for peer learning and exchanging good practices between the EHEA countries.

- The country submits the presented self-certification report to the BFUG Secretariat for publishing on the EHEA website and the country publishes the report on the ENIC/NARIC website.

If a joint report of the self-certification and referencing process has been composed, the report should be also submitted to the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, see Box no 1.

Box. 1. Procedure of submission of the joint report including the self-certification and the referencing reports

EQF AG Note 43-4 in section 5 describes the procedure for the discussion on the referencing report, which consists of the following steps:

- The draft revised report is sent to all EQF AG members 4 weeks in advance of its discussion by the EQF AG.
- A small group of EQF AG members (3-4) analyses the report and presents its views to the EQF AG when the report is discussed. This could replace the current procedure whereby EQF AG members can, on a voluntary basis, give their comments.
- Cedefop analyses the report and provides written comments that are shared with the country at the latest one week before the report discussion.
- In the EQF AG meeting the country updating the referencing gives a presentation of the update (max 30 minutes), which is followed by a discussion started by Cedefop, the Council of Europe (in particular to ensure compatibility with the QF EHEA) and the countries that have prepared the comments. The entire discussion will last about 1.5 hrs.
- The EQF AG members, analysing and commenting the report during the EQF AG meetings should be different from the international experts that provided written statements included in the report in accordance with criterion 8). The EQF AG members involved in the preparation of the discussion could both represent countries or stakeholders. They could be chosen either ad random or proposed by the country. There should be a fair distribution of work among all members of the EQF AG in the process of discussing updates of referencing reports.

Follow-up to the discussion in the EQF AG:

- Cedefop and the Council of Europe draft a summary note, which will be sent to the country within 4 weeks after the discussion in the EQF AG.
- In line with referencing criterion 9 and within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the updated referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

Source: EQF Advisory Group Note 43-4 on the Updating of EQF referencing as part of the EQF AG work programme 2018-2019

The self-certification process may be an important opportunity to ensure the quality and international recognition of higher education qualifications. Therefore, it is essential to approach the process with a thorough and collaborative approach.

The self-certification report should be clear, concise, and well-structured, and should provide evidence that the country is in compliance with the EHEA commitments and recommendations.

Chapter 5. Structure and content of the self-certification report

The countries that participated in the survey provided the following content as mandatory for the self-certification reports. This is also based on Št'astná (2008) and analysis of the self-certification reports. Furthermore, this structure was discussed during the PLA on Self-Certification organised in the terms of the QUATRA – TPG A project in Tbilisi in September 2023.

1. Introduction: main message and purpose of the report, how the report was prepared, and by whom.
2. Comprehensive description of the HE system including:
 - Landscape (scheme) of higher education system with further pathways
 - Higher education bodies, their governance and financing
 - Higher education legal framework
 - Types of higher education institutions
 - Admission requirements
 - Learning outcomes and cycle descriptors
 - Comparison of national qualifications with the Dublin descriptors (and if necessary, with the EQF level descriptors)
 - Credit system
 - Diploma Supplement (legal provisions, structure, reference to EQF/QF-EHEA)
 - Quality assurance system
 - Implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention
 - Validation of non-formal and informal learning
 - EHEA values within the national higher education system (e.g., academic autonomy, academic freedom, academic integrity, participation of students in governance of the higher education systems)
 - Social dimensions (e.g., students with special needs, underrepresenting groups, tuition fees, students' mental health, stakeholders' rights and responsibilities)
3. Description of criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of national qualifications framework of HE with the QF-EHEA
4. International experts' review statements
5. Statement(-s) of the relevant QA agency or QA agencies
6. Letter of Endorsement from approving body (if relevant in terms of national legislation)

7. Annexes with all the official documents, which provide evidence of the self-certification process.

Chapter 6. Involvement of international experts

International experts are expected to provide an objective perspective on the self-certification process. As indicated in BFUG report: “There is a strong need for continued exchange of experience in preparation of self-certification, both through European and regional events and through expanding the pool of potential international experts in self-certification exercises. The participation of international experts is an essential part of the self-certification”.

There is no standardised way to involve international experts in finalising the QF-EHEA self-certification, and the countries' experiences vary.

Some official guidelines related involvement of international experts might be found in the EQF AG Note 43-4 of December 2017, which was prepared to guide countries on updating the referencing reports within the EQF process. The note indicates that: “the updated referencing report should be reviewed by at least two international experts from (at least) two different countries who need to provide a written statement with their assessment of the report (criterion 8). The report should include information on the state of play of indicating EQF levels on certificates, diplomas, and supplements) and/or qualification registers (criterion 10)” (EQF AG 2017, p. 3).

The role and scope of Involvement of international experts and practices within the self-certification process were described in detail in Dželalija and Maguire (2016) report. Based on this report and discussion within the TPG A, the following observations and recommendations can be made:

1. The squad of international experts, i.e., their number, expertise and country of origin, as well as the stage of their involvement in the self-certification process, should reflect the objectives of a country towards the self-certification process

Based on the discussions within the QUATRA – TPG A project, TPG A recommends involving a minimum two experts for the self-certification report and possible three or more for the joint report, including self-certification and the referencing report, depending on the national sources.

2. The role of international experts

International experts should provide an objective and unbiased assessment of the national qualifications framework (NQF) and its alignment with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA. International experts are expected to present their opinions regarding fulfilment of each verification and process criteria.

As noted by Dželalija and Maguire (2016) “international experts have not been in all cases involved in all stages. They have been usually involved more or less productively when concrete levelling and quality assurance issues begin to arise, and as an advanced draft version of the report becomes available”.

However, based on the discussions within the TPG A members, international experts should be involved at the earliest possible stage of the work on the self-certification process, so they can adequately assess not only the process, but also the verification criteria of the self-certification process. Engaging the international experts from the beginning of the process would also allow them to act as critical friends – their external perspective might help identify gaps, inconsistencies, or areas for improvement that might not be apparent to local or national

stakeholders, they might also share information about practices and solutions that might be inspirational for national stakeholders and decision makers.

3. The self-certification report should explicitly include statements from international experts on the report and the self-certification process

It is very important that the report clearly demonstrates what the role was of the international experts in the self-certification process, what the rationale was for their engagement and at what stage of the work on the self-certification they were involved. From the experts, it is expected that, on the one hand, they will be genuine in the assessment of the report and the extent to which a country fulfils the self-certification criteria, but on the other hand, some issues that arose during the process might need to stay confidential. Experts should be independent and objective, meaning they should not have any conflict of interest that may affect their judgment. They should be able to evaluate the NQF and the self-certification process critically and impartially.

By providing an independent and objective assessment, international experts help ensure that the self-certification process is rigorous, transparent, and consistent with the criteria and procedures agreed upon by the EHEA ministers. This, in turn, helps building trust and mutual understanding among EHEA countries, thereby facilitating the recognition and comparability of qualifications across the region.

4. Expertise of experts

Reflections on the report and the self-certification process from the international experts should be included in the report as this would give an extra layer of transparency, understanding and trust. As noted by Stestna (2008, p. 10-11) “to give credibility to the self-certification process it is not enough that a country carries out the process itself without using a commonly agreed methodology, with clearly defined steps and criteria, and with international external examiners involved in the verification process. The verification of national frameworks for qualifications is a challenge for each of the national higher education systems. The procedures outlined give credibility to systems and thereby also improve recognition of qualifications for academic as well as professional purposes. The participation of international experts is also a good opportunity for national authorities to be confronted with difficult and possibly also unpleasant questions which should be asked anyway, but become part of a fruitful exercise within a system of trust”.

The topic of involvement of international experts has been present in discussions since the beginning of the self-certification and referencing process. During the Official Bologna Conference in Tbilisi State University in Georgia in 2008, devoted to the principles of self-certification the following questions and comments were raised which are crucial of importance:

- It is crucial that international experts share the same criteria and procedures when evaluating self-certification reports,
- National particularities and difficult issues should be described in the self-certification report in an open way. It is better to state honestly that there are still difficult issues, blind paths in the system, etc.

- How can the most difficult issues be brought out? Should the countries not stick to protection of their own systems? And how should the countries deal with the disagreements during the self-certification process? They can occur at all levels – even between the stakeholders, institutions and authorities at national level. This could be solved by involvement of the stakeholders from the very beginning of the self-certification procedure and provide them with a feeling of “ownership” of the framework as well as of the report. But what about discrepancies among international experts? Or between the international and national evaluation? Who is to play the arbiter?
- And how shall the countries deal with the national reports which are assessed as ‘not credible’?

The following observations were made regarding expertise of the international experts:

- International experts should have a deep understanding of higher education systems, both in their own country and internationally. This includes knowledge of the Bologna Process, the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and quality assurance processes, among others.
- Experts should be familiar with the development, implementation, and maintenance of qualifications frameworks. This includes an understanding of how qualifications are designed based on learning outcomes, how they are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits, and how they are quality-assured.
- Involved international experts might come from countries that share similar features of the education and/or qualifications systems but also from countries with very different organisations of education systems.

Chapter 7. Preparation of the self-certification report along with the referencing report and relation with the referencing process within the EQF development – key information

The QF-EHEA was adopted at the Conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education in Bergen, 19-20 May 2005.

Since 2005, in parallel to the developments of QF-EHEA in the terms of the Bologna Process, the European Commission started work on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The proposal for EQF was launched by the European Commission in September 2006. The Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning was formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 23 April 2008 (see: Štastná, 2008). In 2017, the Council adopted a new EQF Recommendation (on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning).

The EQF for lifelong learning is an overarching qualifications framework that connects the NQFs of 41 European countries (27 EU member countries, four EFTA countries and seven pre-accession countries). After referencing, countries can indicate the EQF level on their qualifications and link their database or register of qualifications with those of other countries through the Europass platform. This process is limited to the 41 countries represented in the EQF Advisory Group, while EHEA consists of 49 countries. Yet several countries are part of the EQF AG and not EHEA.

This means that in EHEA, two compatible but not identical qualifications frameworks are in operation. Their compatibility was emphasised, among others, by Ministers at the Bologna Conference in London: “We are satisfied that national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA will also be compatible with the proposal from the European Commission on a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning...” (London Communiqué, 2007). As noted by Štastná (2008, p. 4.), the Ministers sent a clear signal that at the national level one framework for qualifications should be developed which is compatible with both frameworks at the European level.

The self-certification report and the referencing report serve related but distinct purposes, and both are essential for enhancing the transparency, recognition, and comparability of qualifications. While the self-certification report focuses specifically on higher education qualifications, the referencing report covers all levels of education and training. By preparing both reports, a country can ensure the comprehensiveness and compatibility of its entire education and training system with European frameworks.

This is also the possibility to present one report. For countries within the EHEA and EQF processes, there are expectations to submit a joint report including self-certification and referencing criteria. As noted by Dželalija and Maguire (2016, p. 5.): “The EQF Advisory Group sees a single report presenting the results of the EQF referencing process and the QF-EHEA self-certification process as a tool for increased transparency indicating that the processes have been closely coordinated and agreed by stakeholders.”

Conducting self-certification and referencing processes simultaneously might also lead to synergies between higher education and vocational education including adult training organised often by private providers outside the formal education system.

An important aspect to be remembered is – as noted by Dželalija and Maguire (2016) – that: “fulfilment of only the EQF referencing criteria does not guarantee at the same time the fulfilment of all QF-EHEA self-certification criteria and procedures and fulfilment of QF-EHEA criteria and procedures does not guarantee automatic fulfilment of all EQF criteria even in respect to the HE element of the national framework. It should also be underlined that in the case of the QF-EHEA, the objective is to show that the national higher education qualifications structure matches that of the QF-EHEA. In broad terms, a kind of a harmonisation with the QF-EHEA is expected. This follows from the fundamental logic of the Bologna Process action line of restructuring degree cycles. In the case of the EQF, the national qualifications system should demonstrate how it relates to the EQF descriptively but without any prescribed or implied convergence”. However, even if one report is prepared both set EHEA and EQF criteria must be fulfilled separately. When comparing both sets of criteria for self-certification and referencing, quite a substantial overlap between them may be observed. Recent examples include the updated referencing reports of Latvia and Ireland.

Latvia⁵ and Ireland⁶ explicitly indicated in the title structure and content of their reports that they aim to fulfil the EQF and self-certification criteria; therefore, they might serve as examples of good practices.

The countries, which have completed the self-certification process on compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA, do not need to repeat the process for relevant EQF levels, and vice versa. One national verification process for both frameworks would avoid double work, promote transparency, and benefit students and employers (Šťastná, 2008).

As noted above, thus, there is a number of countries within EHEA, which are not part of the EQF process. However, the EQF Recommendation (2017) introduced a new process for countries outside the EQF Advisory Group, namely the comparison process.

The EQF Recommendation of 2017 asked the European Commission and the Member States to explore procedures and criteria to enable the comparison of third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF and makes a link to international agreements concluded between the EU and third countries and other regional economic communities.

In 2020-2021, an EQF AG project group, which included representatives from EU member countries and different bodies of the European Union, developed a procedure on how to incorporate topics and criteria in a comparison exercise based on dialogue. The EQF Advisory Group has discussed these and given the green light for piloting the approach. Pilots have been completed with Ukraine and Cape Verde. The comparison report for Ukraine has been published on the Europass portal.

⁵ Title of the Latvian report is the following: Referencing the Latvian Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework for European Higher Education Area Updated Self-Assessment Report. Riga: November 2018.

⁶ Title of the Irish report is the following: The Irish National Framework of Qualifications: Referencing to the European Qualifications Framework and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. 2020.

Comparison is understood as a process that should enable trust in the quality and level of qualifications of qualifications frameworks in order to support recognition and the international mobility of learners and workers. The objectives of comparison are not fundamentally different from the objectives of EQF referencing: both seek to enhance the transparency and comparability of qualifications. More about the comparison process is explained in Operational Guidelines issued by European Commission with the support of European Training Foundation and (EC, 2021).

The comparison process provides a window for opportunity for EHEA countries to work jointly on the self-certification and the referencing processes. Although this opportunity needs to be discussed further with the European Commission and EQF AG for it to become a practice. The condition to start the comparison process is that the NQF in a given country is operational. As noted by the ETF, the EQF is not merely a technical instrument; the EU uses it in its external relations policies. Examples of the political role the EQF plays include association agreements and mobility partnerships signed by the EU with neighbouring countries, as well as the benchmarking exercise that took place from 2013 to 2015 comparing the EQF with well-established qualifications frameworks in Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong.

Chapter 8. Updating self-certification reports

Most of the self-certification reports have been produced some years ago. Education systems in countries evolve over time due to various reasons including technological advancements, socio-economic changes, policy shifts, and feedback from stakeholders.

As these systems change, the self-certification reports need to reflect the current state of affairs. The credibility of the EHEA is based on mutual trust. Regularly updated reports ensure that countries are transparent about their education systems and are adhering to the agreed standards.

Based on the discussions within the TPG A, it is recommended that self-certification reports are updated when major changes are implemented in the national higher education systems, but not later than 5-7 years.

Regular updates to the self-certification reports allow countries to engage with various stakeholders in the process. This can include universities, quality assurance agencies, student bodies, and other educational institutions. Such engagement can ensure that the reports are comprehensive and reflect reality.

According to the EQF AG Note 54-3, “Trusting EQF levels requires trust in the information provided by countries on their national qualifications systems and frameworks. Outdated and irrelevant information included in existing and published EQF referencing reports can undermine the overall functioning and standing of the EQF as a tool for transparency, portability and comparability of qualifications in Europe”.

Annex 1. Description of the survey and key survey findings

Introduction

“We commit to completing and further developing the National Qualifications Frameworks compatible with the Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and ask the BFUG to update the criteria for self-certification to include a stronger element of peer review of national reports. We mandate the Network of QF correspondents to continue its work, contributing to the further development of the QF-EHEA and the self-certification of national qualifications frameworks against it”.

Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Rome, 2020

Working Group on Self-Certification⁷ conducted the survey to collect the experience and best practices of TPG A members on the self-certification process on compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA. Besides, the survey was filled by the TPG A member countries, which have not conducted the self-certification process yet. These countries provided information on the major challenges and emerged needs for the self-certification process. As a follow-up step, the survey findings will be used by the Working Group as the background information for developing recommendations on NQF self-certification. The template of the questionnaire is available in the Annex 2.

The questionnaire was sent to all members of TPG A on December 16, 2022. The deadline for the responses was defined by January 16, 2023. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) Lessons learnt from the NQF self-certification process: perspective of countries, which completed the self-certification process. (2) Key challenges related to the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have not completed the self-certification process. In total 16 countries sent their responses including: (1) countries which have completed the self-certification process: Albania, Austria, Croatia, Flemish Community of Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, North Macedonia, Poland and Romania; (2) countries which have the self-certification in their policy agenda: Azerbaijan, Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Georgia.

Key Findings

Lessons learnt from the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have completed the self-certification process

The countries which sent their responses completed the self-certification process on compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA from 2009 to 2022. Germany (2008) and Flemish Community of Belgium (2009) are one of the first countries, which completed the NQF self-certification process. Latvia conducted the NQF self-certification and referencing process in

⁷ Self-certification Working Group was established in 2022 per request of TPG A member countries. WG aims at providing platform for discussion on the existing Bologna Process self-certification mechanism and for exchange the experiences among countries. From the discussions WG will prepare the main findings and recommendations (written document) on self-certification, which will be presented at the self-certification PLA in Georgia in September, 2023. Working Group on Self-Certification is composed of 8 members: Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Latvia. In 2023, Sweden joined the WG as an observer. WG is co-chaired by Bulgaria and Georgia.

2011, in addition to this, the report was updated in 2018. It is worth mentioning that some countries reported that they conducted the self- certification and referencing process of NQF together and prepared the single report (Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Croatia). The most of the countries provided the link(s) to the national self-certification report. The reports are uploaded on the website of national bodies responsible for the NQF management and development, ENIC/NARIC website <https://www.enic-naric.net> and the European Union Portal https://european-union.europa.eu/index_en

What is the experience gained during the self-certification process?

The countries mentioned the following aspects while reporting their experience gained from the self-certification process, namely:

- The NQF self-certification process was a comprehensive and extended process, which included several stages and measures such as: evaluation of compatibility of NQF with the self-certification criteria and evidence collection, recommendations on development and implementation of the legislative and methodological changes for alignment with the QF-EHEA self-certification criteria, engagement of the international experts and capacity building activities for stakeholders. Almost all reported countries (Croatia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland and Romania) provided the detailed description of key steps in the self-certification process. Engagement and close collaboration with stakeholders were very core for the process success. Germany mentioned that the consultations among the lands were important to make agreement on key issues. In Latvia and Hungary, the self-certification process also went through intensive consultation process. Given the significance of the process, in Croatia the NQF referencing and self-certification process was guided by the Croatian Committee for Implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF), which was established by the Croatian Government. The national experts' role was important to draft the working version of the self-certification report. In all countries the international experts were engaged in the process. The experts were selected and invited based on their expertise in HE systems and qualifications frameworks (Croatia, Latvia, Germany).
- The self-certification process required time and dedication of many stakeholders and countries investing important efforts in development of self-certification report. The report in all countries were reviewed/discussed among the key stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, bodies responsible for the quality assurance, ENIC/NARIC focal points, students' unions, social partners and etc. In almost all countries the working process was managed by the formally established task force. For this aim, Flemish Community of Belgium established the verification committee, which was consisted of seven international experts and all national key stakeholders. The committee had the mandate to discuss the conformity of the NQF of Flanders to the QF-EHEA. In Latvia, the Ministry of Education and Science set up a working group (all relevant stakeholder, including labour market and students) for referencing/self-certifying the Latvian qualifications system to the EQF and QF-EHEA, to review and approve the level descriptors. Croatia also ensured a strong involvement of all the important stakeholders

in the preparation of the report and in discussions: “National advisors from different institutions and sectors were included to review the draft report (members of the Accreditation Council of the Agency for Science and Higher Education, Croatian Employers’ Association, National Centre for the External Evaluation of Education, University of Zagreb, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, University of Split)”. In Germany, the steering group of national stakeholders was set up in 2007, “with one member each from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research BMBF, the Standing Conference of the Education Ministers of the 16 countries (KMK), the Accreditation Council, the Rectors’ Conference HRK, the national student union FZS, plus 2 international reviewers. The input of the international experts was to make sure that, also from a non-German perspective”. North Macedonia established a core group of four members and large group of all relevant stakeholders. “Core group was collecting the information and took care for criteria and procedures while large group was discussing and solving all issues”. The process in Romania from the implementation of QF-EHEA to the self-certification was very long and lasted from 2008 until 2015. Romania set up working group and a Steering Committee “as a special consultative body including representatives of the stakeholders and international experts to review and approve the self-certification report”.

As already mentioned, **in all countries** the international experts provided input to the self-certification report.

- **Some countries conducted the NQF self-certification and referencing process together (Albania, Croatia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland).** This made the report preparation process even more complex, as this requested the countries analysis/reporting on all sub-sectors of the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF referencing criteria.
- **The self-certification reports for the most countries have not been updated since they were published.** One country reported that the report is no longer available online.

What were the key challenges in the self-certification process? Please list 3-5 examples and briefly explain them.

The countries reported the following challenges in the self-certification process:

- **The alignment of the national systems to the Bologna Process key commitments and self-certification criteria.**

Flemish Community of Belgium reported the following challenges: “In the beginning, the new Three-Tier-structure had to overcome old habits and traditions. The relevance of the academic oriented Bachelor’s degree on and for the labour market was at that time an issue. Further implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention received more attention, especially at HEIs. Master’s degrees with a load of study of (only) 60 ECTS need to be examined also in the context of international recognition. The Diploma Supplement, obligatory as it is, needed further development, especially regarding currently absent learning outcomes. Possible future

qualifications of which the learning outcomes match with the Dublin Descriptors for the short cycle needed to be recognised as such within the national qualifications framework”.

Hungary reported that the working group had to deal with the legal and procedural constraints particularly related to commitment to use of learning outcomes. “It was necessary to find an appropriate way to deal with the fact that, due to the limited practice of using learning outcomes, the level-descriptors formulated by learning outcomes in the descriptor categories were not always sufficiently distinct, well separated from the level-descriptors of the next level above or below; and did not always show strong horizontal coherence. It was necessary to be able to get away from the fact that level descriptors are abstract theoretical constructs that do not always work consistently in practice; that is, assessment procedures were not advanced enough to measure to what extent the end of the learning and teaching process the level of intended learning outcomes is achieved.

Croatia emphasised that in the preparation of the report, it was challenging the provision of the clear description of the HE system, which needed the national expertise, agreement with the key stakeholders and application of the different communication strategies when presenting the draft report.

Albania reported that national systems referencing/self-referencing process raised questions regarding the alignment. The experts used and made “profit and treasure from good European practices in the respective referencing processes under the aim of adapting the Albanian case to their similar circumstances”.

Some countries mentioned that the changes in the national legal framework and the methodologies were needed to implement for alignment with the Bologna Process key commitments related to the HE qualifications quality assurance and inclusion of the qualifications in NQF. In this regard, North **Macedonia reported** that “main issues were related with quality assurance, pre-Bologna qualifications and the Register of qualifications”.

This was also challenging that the countries had to collect and provide the evidence in the self-certification report on the alignment with each self-certification criteria.

- **Lack of understanding of the necessity and added value of the self-certification process and achievement the agreement on national level**

Latvia mentioned that this was a challenge. Germany reported agreement among the lands was one of the key challenges, “as often in educational discussions in Germany, to reach agreement among the federal and the 16 state authorities”. Hungary similarly reported that “one of the major challenges was to reconcile the prior knowledge, different views and expectations of those persons involved in the process, to become a well-cooperating, constructive working group. It was necessary to create a working environment in which they felt the interest and commitment of policy makers”. **Croatia** also reported that it was necessary to achieve agreement between the numerous stakeholders who participated in the NQF self-certification process.

- **Lack of clear guidance on the self-certification process and engagement of the international experts**

The lack of guidance in the process was mentioned almost by all countries. No guidelines how to write the self-certification report was available. The countries did not follow any instructions for the selection of the international experts. Austria reported that “Looking back, the key

challenge was that the timeframe of the report was simply too early. There were no experiences within the Austrian context nor much exchange/ help from other BFUG members”. **Latvia** mentioned the same challenge “missing guidelines how to write self-certification process; to choose international experts”. **Albania** reported that selection of the best national and international experts covering all areas of the Albanian educational system was challenging.

- **The self-certification process is time-lasting and includes many steps**

All countries devoted significant time to NQF self-certification process. For example, North **Macedonia** reported that process from the implementation of NQF to the self-certification with the QF-EHEA was very long from 2008 until 2015. “All implementation was organised on the manner that will later respond to the fulfilling of the criteria and procedures and they are part of the report. Main issues were related with quality assurance, pre-Bologna qualifications and the Register of qualifications”. Only consultation process with stakeholders lasted in Hungary for months “over 8 months, 12 full-day workshops were held to discuss with stakeholders and enable them not only to participate, but also to continue the discussions in their own organisations, using the learning by doing methodology”.

- **Identify the appropriate timing to start the self-certification process**

Austria emphasised the importance of right timing for initiating the self-certification process. “The key challenge was that the timeframe of the report was simply too early. There were no experiences within the Austrian context”.

How did you solve the above-described challenges?

- All countries agree that as the self-certification process is a complex and long-lasting, they employed a step-by-step approach to complete the process. Countries coordinated very intensive discussions among stakeholders and applied cooperative techniques and deliberative working procedures.
- All countries reported that the task force was formally created with the composition of the key stakeholders to undertake all steps in the self-certification process and prepare report.
- All countries mentioned that they undertook the important legal and methodological amendments for compliance of their national systems to the QF-EHEA self-certification criteria.
- All countries conducted the intensive national consultations and awareness raising activities to transfer the knowledge to numerous stakeholders; different communication methods were used. Countries reported that the high level of knowledge and understanding of the Bologna Process and national system is key to successfully complete the self-certification process.
- All countries invited international experts despite the fact that the selection criteria were not available. For experts’ selection countries made decision based on the invited

experts' professional experience in HE system and qualifications framework development.

What do you think is mandatory information to be included in the self-certification report (content)?

Countries provided the following content as the mandatory for the self-certification report:

1. Introduction: how the report was prepared and by whom

2. Comprehensive description of HE system including:

- Higher education bodies
- Higher education legal framework
- General objectives of the higher education programs & curriculum
- Higher Education Institutions
- Admission requirements
- Learning agreements/outcomes
- Tuition fees
- Academic year
- Credit system
- Diploma Supplement
- Quality assurance system
- Implementation of Lisbon Recognition Convention
- Cycle descriptors
- Comparison of National Qualifications with the Dublin Descriptors (and the EQF for LLL descriptors in case of referencing NQF to EQF)
- National standards
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning
- National Examples for all abovementioned issues

2. International experts' review

3. Referencing of the national qualifications framework to the QF-EHEA (Compliance of Self-Assessment Process with Criteria and Procedures of EHEA)

4. An Appendix with all the official documents, which provides evidence on the self-certification process.



What support did you get from the Bologna Process working structures (BFUG) in the self-certification process?

Most of the countries did not get any targeted support in the self-certification process. **Latvia and Germany** did not get any specific support. **Germany** reported that they did not need the additional assistance. **Flemish Community of Belgium** reported that the self-certification report was prepared by the Verification Committee of independent international experts consisted of seven international professionals, who were recognition experts in the ENIC&NARIC Network. For **Hungary** the “main support came from the EQF Advisory Group, where the examples of countries presenting their own reports and the discussion on them contributed significantly to understanding what approaches to take”. **Albania** closely cooperated with the EQF Advisory Group and international experts by organising regular online meeting and workshops on specific issues during all stages of the process. **Poland** emphasised that “Participation in seminars and training, PLAs, and BFUG publications were very useful. Examples of working QF systems from the UK or Ireland were particularly important. In the next stages - support from foreign experts, foreign reviews of the report”. The importance of the other countries report examples was mentioned as well by the **Flemish Community of Belgium** “in 2009, only Denmark, Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom also have submitted and made public their self-certification reports”.

The countries also mentioned other targeted institutional and technical support to successfully develop the NQF and accomplish the self-certification and referencing process. For instance, **Poland** got support of European Funds (via Polish National Agency – FRSE). **Hungary** completed all steps of the self-certification process within the framework of the EU funded project “Both self-referencing and self-certification were carried out in the framework of an EU-funded national project to develop and implement the NQF (referred to as Hungarian Qualifications Framework; HuQF)”.

Based on your experience, what recommendation(-s) would you provide to Bologna Working structure (BFUG), which will support the countries in the self-certification process?

Belgium suggested that collaborative working model like the DS-model can be proposed to countries which are willing to draft a self-certification report. **Latvia** proposed **development of the Guidelines** on the self-certification process, “which can help to prepare the Self-Certification Peer review and feedback from BFUG”. In addition, presentation of self-certification report in BFUG structures: National correspondents meeting and TPG A meetings were also proposed by Latvia. **Hungary** stressed the need of explicit and understandable methods and procedures on the linking the qualifications to cycles “What is not sufficiently transparent and little information is available is the range of methods and procedures used for including (linking) qualifications in (to) cycles/levels - which also underpins self-certification. In this area, it would be worthwhile to collect, analyse and compare the methods and procedures used in the various countries, and to highlight, discuss and publish good practices”. The other important recommendation repeatedly mentioned by the countries is related to international

experts' selection and participation. This should be more explicit. The last but not least important mentioned aspect include identify the appropriate timeframe for launching the self-certification process. **Austria** suggested to “weight the estimated time frame against the expected outcome before starting the project”. **Albania stressed the importance of** creation the climate of cooperation and regular “exchange of the best practices in view of solving any issue raised by the country's experts in way of running the process”.

The most of the countries replied that the self-certification criteria content and procedure were clear, however, the instructions and guidelines were not available. In addition, the countries highlighted that, the criteria for selection of the international experts were not available. Also, countries responded that they did not receive any targeted peer support of Bologna Process working structures in self-certification process. Some countries never requested such a support. **However, almost all countries mentioned that working meetings and seminars, which were organised by the Bologna Process working structures were very helpful in terms of the information sharing and capacity building.**

Additional findings, which should be taken into consideration:

- The countries, which conducted NQF self-certification and referencing process together, reported that the process was very complex, which required education system-wide expertise (for all subsectors of education) and knowledge.
- The countries emphasised the importance of the self-certification report update.

Key challenges in the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which are in the process of self-certification

The countries which have not completed the self-certification process yet provided the perspective on challenged and emerged needs. From the received feedback, it is clear that this group of countries has similar problems as this is presented below.

What obstacles do you face in the self-certification process? Please list 3-5 examples and briefly explain them.

The following key obstacles were reported:

- **Lack of awareness and clear guideline on self-certification process/lack of a rubrics/interpretation of the self-certification criteria**

All countries mentioned the lack of clear guideline on procedural issues and self-certification criteria (**Azerbaijan, Armenia, Andorra, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia**). Countries shared that there is lack of expertise and knowledge on how to put into practice the self-certification process. **Andorra** reported that the official document from the Council of Europe and the European Commission describing the criteria and procedure both for the self-certification process to the EHEA and for the referencing process to the EQF are not available. Also, there is uncertainty among the countries on determining the exact content of the which information and structure should the national report contain. **Georgia** mentioned there is a lack of

information among the Georgian relevant institutions how to plan and proceed the actual NQF referencing/self-certification process. Countries also emphasised the question about the exact content of the self-certification report. **Azerbaijan** also emphasised the limited information among the responsible authorities on the aim and value of the NQF self-certification process.

- **The countries have formal obligations for NQF self-certification and referencing process; however, there are the questions regarding the alignment of the criteria of QF-EHEA and EQF**

Andorra provided example to this question “we faced the problem to have to give information on 10 criteria and procedures for the QF-EHEA and on 10 criteria and procedures for the EQF. As the information is basically the same, we were advised orally by the Council of Europe representatives to expose the information differently: to describe, on the one hand, the learning outcomes of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd level and compare them with the Dublin descriptors. On the other hand, to answer to the 10 criteria and procedure considering the EQF. There should be indications in a normative document about how to proceed if a country wants to compare both frameworks.”

- **Lack of the clear information on the inclusion of international experts (what are the selection criteria, from which stage the international experts should be involved)**

All countries are aware that the international experts have to contribute to the process, however they have questions regarding the experts' selection criteria. This issue was not clear for them. **Armenia** mentioned that they are “lack of clear information on the inclusion of international experts (what are the selection criteria, from which stage the international experts should be involved)”. The same challenge was mentioned by all other countries which sent their responses.

- **Long procedures that are needed for the development of a mechanism/procedures to put into practice the self-certification process**

In **Bulgaria**, the self-certification report was prepared and approved but never submitted “as there were legislative changes that affected the primary-school and school systems so the report should be adjusted accordingly. This still is not done so the self-certification process is not completed although the Higher Education part is prepared and not changed afterwards”. **Georgia** stated that there are some important measures to be taken before the self-certification process is initiated. For instance, the digitalization of the national qualifications project has been planned and is in process to ensure the transparency of the Georgian national qualifications. In addition, **Cyprus** stressed that there is challenge of “bureaucratic long-time procedures that are needed for the development of a mechanism to put into practice the self-certification process”.

What information or guidance do you need?

The surveyed countries named the following areas they need additional information or guidance:

- Any lessons learnt, examples from other European countries that have finished the self-certification process. “It would be good to hear presentations of several countries about their experiences writing the national report: to hear comments about what they did correct and things they did wrong, recommendations on what to do and not to do, to hear challenges they faced when answering the criteria and procedures, etc.” (Andorra).
- Detailed explanation notes on the content of the criteria and procedure step-by-step. “It would be good to hear about the steps to do once the report has been written: Who should we send it to? Council of Europe? EU Commission? Is there a department which receives the reports?” (Andorra).
- Guidance, including peer support, on how to select the international expert. Countries need the information on how to engage the international experts in this process, what are the selection criteria and when the experts should step in (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia).
- Clear guidelines of the requirements of NQF self-certification and referencing process simultaneously (Andorra, Georgia).

How the Bologna Process working structures can support the countries in self-certification process?

Countries provided the following suggestions:

- Provision of detailed guidelines on how to put into practice the self-certification process.
- Include Bologna Process working structures or the consortium of the countries, which already successfully drafted the self-certification report in development of the guidelines on self-certification.
- Provision of successful examples from other member countries, which have already finished the self-certification process.
- Organisation of peer learning activities including the study visits to the countries, which have already undergone the process and conduct meeting with the working groups and international experts, to discuss the lessons learnt.
- Provide the platform for self-certification report development and peer review.
- Provide the international experts’ selection criteria for national authorities.
- Ensure the visibility of the reports (for example: the national reports can be uploaded on the EHEA website).

Almost all countries agreed that self-certification criteria and procedure are somehow clear and understandable. However, all countries mentioned that Bologna Process instructions on self-certification are not available. The requirements and selection criteria for the international experts are not clear. All countries agree that detailed guidelines can help national authorities to complete the self-certification process. And, finally, the need of engagement the national stakeholders are acknowledged by all countries.



Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A (QUATRA – TPG A)



Annex 2. Questionnaire for the members of the TPG A on the self-certification process

Deadline: Monday, January 16, 2023

“We commit to completing and further developing the National Qualifications Frameworks compatible with the Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and ask the BFUG to update the criteria for self-certification to include a stronger element of peer review of national reports. We mandate the Network of QF correspondents to continue its work, contributing to the further development of the QF-EHEA and the self-certification of national qualifications frameworks against it”. Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Rome, 2020

Dear TPG A on QF member,

As you are informed from the TPG A on QF meetings, per group members’ request, the **Working Group on Self-Certification** was established in 2022. WG aims at providing platform for discussion on the existing Bologna Process self-certification mechanism and for exchange the experiences among countries. From the discussion WG on Self-Certification will prepare the main findings and recommendations (written document) on self-certification, which will be presented at the self-certification PLA in Georgia next year.

This survey has been initiated by WG on Self-Certification to collect the lessons learnt from countries which have already successfully completed the self-certification process. Besides, the questionnaire will inform the TPG A on QF on the major challenges and needed support of the countries which are in the process of the self-certification. Finally, the survey findings will make background and feed in the recommendations on self-certification as the key deliverable of WG work.

Accordingly, the presented questionnaire consists of two parts:

(1) Lessons learnt from the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have completed the self-certification process. The questions in the first part are for the countries which have already completed the self-certification process and are familiar with the content and procedures.

(2) Key challenges in the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which are in the process of self-certification. This part of questionnaire should be filled by the countries which are in the process of self-certification or are planning to start the process.

Please make sure to **answer the questions as concisely as possible and return the filled in document no later than 16 January 2023**, respecting the given **character limits**.

Your participation is very important!

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Country:

Authority(-ies) in charge of self-certification:

Contact person for this questionnaire (Name, Surname, E-mail):

PART I. Lessons learnt from the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which have completed the self-certification process

(Note: This part is mandatory only for the countries which already have completed the self-certification process and submitted self-certification report)

1. When did your country complete the self-certification process? Please, provide the link(s) to the country self-certification report.

2. What is the experience gained during the self-certification process?

Please briefly tell us how the process was organised including the preparation stage, actual phase - working on the report. How did you engage the national key stakeholders and what was their main input? Please also provide the specific input of the international experts. How long did the process last?

(maximum 300 words)

3. What were the key challenges in the self-certification process? Please list 3-5 examples and briefly explain them.

(maximum 300 words)

4. How did you solve the above-described challenges?

(maximum 300 words)

5. What do you think is mandatory information to be included in the self-certification report (content)?

(maximum 300 words)

6. What support did you get from the Bologna Process working structures (BFUG) in the self-certification process?

(For instance, provide platform for sharing other countries experiences, support to engage the international experts, provide platform for Self-certification Report presentation and feedback and etc.)
(maximum 300 words)

7. Based on your experience, what recommendation(-s) would you provide to Bologna Working structure (BFUG), which will support the countries in the self-certification process?

(maximum 300 words)

8. Please answer the questions below

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Self-Certification criteria are clear and understandable				
2. Self-Certification procedure is clear and understandable				
3. Bologna Process instructions on self-certification were available				
4. Country had peer support of Bologna Process working structures in self-certification process				
5. Requirements and selection criteria for the international experts were clear				
6. Self-Certification report preparation process included peer review and feedback				
7. Working on self-certification process needs engagement and approval of national stakeholders				
8. Detailed guidelines can help national authorities to complete the self-certification				
9. Peer support is important for national bodies to complete the self-certification process				
10. Country put significant efforts to periodic updates of its self-certification reports				

PART II. Key challenges in the self-certification process: perspective of countries, which are in the process of self-certification

(Note: This part is mandatory only for the countries, which are in the self-certification process or plan starting the self-certification process)

1. What obstacles do you face in the self-certification process? Please list 3-5 examples and briefly explain them.
(maximum 300 words)

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2. What information or guidance do you need?
(For instance: Is the content of the self-certification criteria clear and understandable? Are the self-certification procedures clear and straightforward? Are you aware on how to engage the international experts in the process? Do you need any guideline, which will help you throughout the self-certification process? and etc.)
(maximum 300 words)

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3. How the Bologna Process working structures can support the countries in self-certification process?

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4. Please answer the questions below

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Self-Certification criteria are clear and understandable				
2. Self-Certification procedures are clear and understandable				
3. Bologna Process instructions on self-certification is available				
4. Requirements and selection criteria for the international experts are clear				
5. Working on self-certification process needs engagement and approval of national stakeholders				
6. Detailed guidelines can help national authorities to complete the self-certification				
7. Peer support is important for national bodies to complete the self-certification				



NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL
QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A (QUATRA – TPG A)

Working Group on Self-Certification is composed of 8 members: Andorra, Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Latvia.

The WG is co-chaired by Georgia and Bulgaria.



Annex 3. List of relevant documents and publications used when preparing recommendations

- BFUG (2007). National Qualifications Frameworks Development and Certification.
- Report from Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks. BFUG Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks.
- BFUG (2009). Report on Qualifications Framework. Bologna Process.
- Coordination Group for Qualifications Framework. Submitted to the BFUG for its meeting on February 12-13, 2009.
- Blomqvist, K. (2012). Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area: The State of Development and Perspectives for the Future. In: *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice*, ed. Carita Blomqvist, Tony Donohoe, Maria Kelo, Karin Järplid Linde, Rafael Llavori, Bryan Maguire, David Metz, Teresa Sanchez. ENQA Workshop Report 21.
- EC and ETF (2021). Comparison of NQFs with the EQF. Operational Guidelines. Brussels/Torino.
- EVA. (2009). *Self-certification. Verification of compatibility of the Danish National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*. Danish Evaluation Institute.
- Dželalija, M., Maguire, B. (2016). *Study of self-certification reports on the compatibility of national qualifications frameworks with the overarching qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area*. Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation, Education Department of the Council of Europe.
- Šťastná, V. (2008). *Aligning National against European Qualifications Frameworks: The Principles of Self-Certification*. Final Report from the Official Bologna Conference the London – Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve work programme Organised by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in co-operation with the Council of Europe.