



*Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A 2  
(QUATRA – TPG A 2)  
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## **Peer Learning Activity**

# **TRANSPARENCY AS A KEY ELEMENT FOR OPERATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **Concept Note**

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Note prepared by: Gunta Kinta, Zane Neilande (Academic Information Centre)

### ***The purpose of the qualifications frameworks***

Qualifications frameworks (QF), which were developed as tools facilitating mobility and lifelong learning, provide a certain classification and system of qualifications according to a set of criteria. In a longer-term, QFs ensure comparison and transparency of qualification systems supporting cross-border recognition of qualifications, mutual trust and, thus, leading to automatic recognition of qualifications. In fact, QFs can serve several purposes and encourage significant developments and reforms in higher education (HE). According to the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005), the purposes of QF-EHEA derive from the objectives of the Bologna Process, and the most relevant of the objectives are “international transparency, recognition, and mobility”<sup>1</sup>.

Qualifications as units in these systems, on one hand, demonstrate the logic and tradition in education of particular country, and, on other hand, have significant role in certifying knowledge, skills and competences of individual and providing them specific rights either in education or labour market. In the context of QF-EHEA (and EQF), the qualifications are classified regarding complexity of learning outcomes achieved by the holders of qualifications. Learning outcomes serve as certain structure and pattern of language that explain particular qualifications ensuring possibility to analyse and compare qualifications in efficient and qualitative manner across the border. Therefore, learning outcomes may be considered as a core element of QFs; as stated by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005): “Learning outcomes represent one of the essential building blocks for transparency within higher education systems and qualifications.”

National education systems are regulated by legislation and traditions which have evolved during a long period of time due to specific social economic circumstances. The contextual information and features may be rather confusing for non-specialists of the education field. QFs ensure transparent reflection of the education system according to certain criteria and elements, e.g. learning outcomes.

NQFs often are described as back-office instruments applied by educators and policy makers, which are too complex and theoretical for learners and individuals to comprehend, but they still can use the benefits provided by the qualifications framework. Overarching QFs (EQF, QF-EHEA) offer possibility to translate various systems in a universal language and ensure reference

<sup>1</sup> Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005). A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.



points, i.e. levels, between various systems, while keeping the individual features of national education systems. “The majority of national frameworks of qualifications employ their own systems of levels, within the broad Bologna cycles, in order to increase the understanding and transparency between their qualifications,” wrote Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005). The Bologna Process through the years has focused on agreeing on core concepts and principles in terms of QFs that are necessary for achieving EHEA.

### ***Transparency in the context of qualifications frameworks***

As mentioned before, QFs facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications across the borders of EHEA countries. According to the Council Recommendation on EQF (2017): “Transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications is one of the new priorities under the 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). That report stresses that the EQF should be further developed in order to make qualifications more transparent and comparable. With regard to newly arrived migrants, it also stresses that existing transparency instruments could help a better understanding of foreign qualifications in the Union, and vice versa.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Council Recommendation (2017) emphasises transparency as a core element for the further development of EQF for lifelong learning. In addition, the international transparency is “at the heart of the Bologna Declaration’s call for a system of easily readable and comparable degrees”, and QFs provide possibility to simplify structures to facilitate mutual understanding across borders (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005).

Regarding QFs, transparency may be considered from various perspectives and using different measures, approaches and tools. In order to provide general overview of the Bologna Process, its context and mission, the fundamental six values of HE – academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in HE governance, public responsibility for HE, and public responsibility of HE – should be examined. Implementing EHEA values in practice would ensure that member countries appreciate and make actions towards achieving the aims and key commitments of Bologna Process.

According to the criteria and procedures for verifying the compatibility of qualifications frameworks with the QF-EHEA, the procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework should be transparent and the self-certification process should involve HE stakeholders, the national ministry with responsibility for higher education (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005). Therefore, transparency could be viewed in the perspective of processes and procedures related both to development of QF and organisation of self-certification. In order to ensure broad recognition on QFs, its formation has to rely on extensive consultation among stakeholders, which assume responsibility for the implementation of the tool.

Qualifications frameworks may strengthen links between education and labour market; therefore, use of clear learning outcomes for describing qualifications is essential for the social dialogue. Explicitly formulated learning outcomes may serve as evidence for employers (and learners) regarding the potential outcomes of HE studies. When designing qualifications and learning outcomes, higher education institutions (HEI) need to apply means of expressions that may be

<sup>2</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 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.



easily comprehended by employers and other stakeholders in order to ensure transparency of their qualifications.

Considering the rapid changes in the labour market, technologies and increasing globalisation, “traditional” HE pathways are not always able to satisfy demand for flexibility and diversity. Hence, procedures and principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes become more significant in the HE practice. Describing validation procedures and system in HE in the self-certification reports was one of the recommendations provided by the TPG A (2023)<sup>3</sup>, which illustrates the prominent place of the validation in education. Existence of validation system shows that HE qualifications are designed in transparent manner, their learning outcomes are formulated and available for the relevant stakeholders.

As mentioned above, QFs are policy driven instruments that reflect all the aspects of the education system and, thus, have influence on all participants of education. Students directly experience policy reforms in their studies, which may change their future career pathways, making their perspective a critical consideration for a purposeful and transparent self-certification process.

### ***Features of operational qualifications frameworks***

Self-certification reports describe QFs and processes leading to their development and implementation. An operational QF is deeply embedded in the HE system reflecting its qualifications in logical structure. Qualifications included in the QF and their learning outcomes are published and available for institutions and individuals; with some countries using their online qualifications databases or registers for this purpose. Furthermore, if diplomas (credentials) include reference to a QF, the visibility and transparency of the tool are facilitated supporting comparability of qualifications and mobility of graduates. In broad terms operational QFs are functioning tools that contribute to the development of higher education.

### ***Summary of the peer learning activity***

The peer learning activity (PLA) of TPG A “Transparency as a key element for operational qualifications frameworks in higher education” reviewed the concept of transparency from various perspectives<sup>4</sup>.

### **Key note – EHEA values within the higher education systems**

The key note explored the growing importance of the fundamental values of the EHEA in the context of occurring global challenges affecting HE systems. The values – academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, collegiality and solidarity, sustainability, participation of students and staff in governance, transparency, public responsibility and democratic governance – are essential for ensuring trust and resilience in higher education.

The discourse within EHEA process on fundamental values, developed between 2018 and 2024<sup>5</sup>, has established a unique European framework of reference for countries to follow. These values

<sup>3</sup> Debowski, H., Tsiramua, Kh., Ramiņa, B., Kinta, G. (2023). Preparation of self-certification reports within the Bologna Process: Guidelines, observations, and recommendations. TPG A Working Group on Self-Certification. Academic Information Centre: Riga. See: [https://aic.lv/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/QUATRA-TPGA\\_recommendations\\_self-certification\\_20.12.2023.pdf](https://aic.lv/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/QUATRA-TPGA_recommendations_self-certification_20.12.2023.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Presentations from the event are posted on the QUATRA – TPG A 2 project webpage. <https://aic.lv/en/about-aic/project/quadra-tpg-a-2-project/pla-on-self-certification>.

<sup>5</sup> The topic has been reflected in the Bologna Process planning documents starting from Paris Communiqué (2018) to the Tirana Communiqué (2024).



should not be viewed only as abstract principles, but as practical commitments, requiring protection, promotion, implementation and monitoring at institutional, national and EHEA levels.

When addressing relationship between QFs and frameworks of reference for HE values, their purposes should be analysed. The EHEA framework of values aims to create shared conceptual reference points supporting comparability, transparency and mutual trust across countries and institutions.

Transparency was presented not only as a technical feature of qualifications systems, but also as an element of democratic governance, stakeholders' participation and public accountability. Special emphasis was placed on academic freedom as a fundamental democratic right and a necessary condition for quality teaching, learning and research. In fact, operational and transparent HE systems depend on meaningful participation of stakeholders, openness of governance processes and clear communication of qualifications, learning outcomes and institutional responsibilities.

The importance of monitoring mechanisms and stakeholder involvement in implementing EHEA values was further highlighted, demonstrating that transparent and operational QFs contribute not only to recognition and mobility, but also to the protection of democratic principles and the public mission of higher education.

### **Arranging the process of self-certification with the involvement of all the stakeholders in Georgia**

The presentation reflected on the gradual development of the Georgian National Qualifications Framework (GNQF) since 2010 and the extensive reforms undertaken, following Georgia's Association Agreement with the European Union, with a special focus on the importance of stakeholder involvement throughout the self-certification and referencing processes.

Georgia has an experience in organising a broad and inclusive governance structure of consultation process involving ministries, HE institutions, employers, sectoral organisations, NGOs, students and international experts<sup>6</sup>. The discussions with the stakeholders also reflected on the content of the country's referencing and self-certification report (to be finalised by autumn 2026). One of conclusions to be drawn was that transparent and operational QFs require continuous consultation, shared ownership and active participation of all relevant stakeholders. The presentation also highlighted the importance of learning outcomes, validation of non-formal and informal learning, and public communication in strengthening mutual trust and recognition within the EHEA.

The Georgian experience illustrated how structured cooperation, peer learning and stakeholder engagement contribute to the credibility, transparency and sustainability of QFs and self-certification process.

### **Transparency as a key element for better understanding of HE qualifications by the labour market (case of Ukraine)**

The presentation explored how transparency can strengthen the link between HE qualifications and labour market demands, especially amid the significant social and economic challenges resulting from the war in Ukraine. Significant demographic and labour market transformation, as well as workforce shortages, regional imbalances and the growing need for reskilling and

<sup>6</sup> In the terms of Erasmus+ Programme project "Strengthening Capacities for the Implementation of Georgian National Qualifications Framework (GNQF) Referencing and Self-certification Processes" (GEOREF).



upskilling have increased the importance of flexible, transparent and labour market-oriented HE systems that can adapt quickly to changing economic and societal demands. Thus, the presentation focused on the role of learning outcomes, occupational standards and competence-based approach in improving the visibility and understanding of qualifications by employers and other stakeholders.

Transparent descriptions of qualifications and competences are considered as essential tools for aligning HE study programmes with labour market expectations and for supporting recognition of both formal and non-formal learning. To facilitate responsiveness of HE system in Ukraine, emerging approaches to short-term HE study programmes and micro-credentials were outlined. Flexible learning pathways, accumulation of learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning were identified as important mechanisms for improving employability, supporting lifelong learning and enabling faster integration of graduates in the labour market.

Simultaneously, several challenges affecting the transparency and implementation of the NQF were discussed, including legislative gaps, limited employers' awareness and insufficient methodological support for developing competence-based occupational standards.

The Ukrainian experience demonstrated that transparent qualifications systems require close cooperation between HEIs, employers, policy makers and other stakeholders in order to ensure relevance, quality and mutual trust.

### **Validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes in HE of Latvia**

The presentation provided an overview of the development and implementation of the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (VNIL) in HE of Latvia, including the evolution of legislation regulating the validation procedures.

The validation of prior learning and experience is closely linked to transparency, lifelong learning and learner mobility. Transparent and clearly defined learning outcomes enable HEIs to assess competences acquired through different learning pathways and within labour market translating prior experience into recognised academic credits and qualifications.

In order to explore the practical implementation of VNIL in HEIs, a study has been conducted in 2025<sup>7</sup>. According to the collected results, validation of learning outcomes achieved in previous education is widely used, while validation of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience remains more limited and resource-intensive. The findings also showed that approaches and practices vary considerably by HEIs depending on their organisational capacity, digitalisation level and experience.

Several challenges still affect the transparency and accessibility of VNIL procedures, including inconsistent understanding of validation processes, insufficient methodological support, limited public awareness and administrative complexity. Meanwhile, positive practices at HEIs were identified, e.g., the use of internal digital systems, guidance materials for students and efficient communication with learners and employers.

Further development of transparent, consistent and accessible VNIL procedures is essential for strengthening lifelong learning opportunities and improving learner mobility within higher education. The close cooperation among HEIs, policy makers and employers remains an important factor for ensuring more transparent recognition of prior learning and professional experience. Continued methodological support, digital development and awareness-raising

<sup>7</sup> The study was carried out by the Academic Information Centre – Latvian NCP (of EQF) in the terms of the Erasmus+ project “EQF – Europass Latvia” (2024-2026).



activities were identified as main directions of actions to promote wider and more effective implementation of validation procedures.

### **Student's perspective on the successful self-certification process (case of Latvia)**

The presentation illustrated students' involvement in ensuring transparency and credibility of self-certification process. QFs are meaningful for students only if they are understandable, accessible and practically applicable in their learning pathways and future careers. The student perspective also demonstrated that QFs directly influence understanding of HE study programmes, learning outcomes, progression routes, recognition of prior learning, mobility opportunities and employability. Hence, transparency was emphasised not merely as the publication of technical documents, but also as the ability for students and other stakeholders to clearly understand qualifications, their levels and practical implications.

Students should have the role of active contributors to self-certification process, because they are both stakeholders and users of QFs who can assess whether learning outcomes, qualification levels and recognition pathways are understandable and meaningful in practice. Student involvement was presented as an important mechanism for connecting policy objectives with actual learning experiences and for identifying discrepancies between formal descriptions and institutional practice.

Meaningful students' participation in the consultations and dialogue, strengthens legitimacy, public trust and the overall quality of self-certification reports. Effective involvement requires early participation, clear roles and expectations, accessible explanatory materials, representative participation and transparent feedback mechanisms demonstrating how students' contributions influence final conclusions.

Several practical approaches to involving students were presented, including participation in steering groups, focus groups, consultations with students' councils and review of draft reports. However, active students' engagement may encounter some challenges, e.g. complex terminology, limited capacity of student representatives, insufficient training and unclear impact of consultations.

Transparency should be understood as an ongoing process of communication, consultation and review. Student-oriented and accessible self-certification process contributes to a stronger trust in QFs, improved understanding of qualifications and greater confidence in HE systems among learners and society.

### **Discussion in small groups on how to write a comprehensive and transparent self-certification report**

The participants of PLA in smaller groups explored two following questions:

- What are the target groups of the self-certification reports?
- What information should be included in (excluded from) the report?

The participants provided a range of perspectives highlighting both the intended audiences and the principles for structuring self-certification reports.

Regarding target groups, the discussion showed broad agreement that self-certification reports should serve multiple stakeholders at national, European, and international levels. The primary audiences include students, HEIs, academic staff, employers, labour market representatives, professional and sectoral organisations, and national authorities (ministries, recognition bodies, and quality assurance agencies). In addition, European-level stakeholders, including quality assurance networks and bodies within the EHEA, were also identified as relevant users.



The same report may need to address different audiences with varying levels of detail, suggesting the need for both simplified, user-friendly versions for a wider public and more technical versions for expert users. The wording and presentation of information should be adapted to specific stakeholder groups to ensure usability and clarity.

In relation to the content of the reports, participants agreed that self-certification should be evidence-based, transparent, clearly structured, and honest about both strengths and weaknesses of the system. The reports should avoid unnecessary repetition and excessive length, instead focusing on clear and concise outline supported by summaries, visuals, and, where appropriate, annexes containing detailed legal or technical information.

The main body of the report should concentrate on the current functioning of the HE system, while historical background, disciplinary differences, and highly technical details could be placed in annexes. The participants also underlined the importance of using accessible language and providing explanations of key concepts to ensure understanding among non-specialist audiences. Furthermore, certain elements, e.g. detailed disciplinary comparisons or information on micro-credentials, may not be central to the purpose of self-certification and could, therefore, be limited or moved to supplementary sections. Yet a strong emphasis was placed on including a forward-looking conclusion to demonstrate lessons learnt, good practices and potential further directions of action, thereby positioning the report as a form of systemic reflection or audit.

The self-certification process should not become overly burdensome or an end in itself for development of a country. Instead of full repetition of the process (or preparing a complete report) for each update, mechanisms for confirming ongoing compliance and development of QFs should be considered; thus, self-certification would support continuous improvement of qualifications systems instead of becoming a purely administrative exercise.

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