

PIN

WP3: Guidelines and questionnaire for the focus groups

The expected **outcome** of workpackage 3 is an overview of the impact of the EQF and its accompanying measures on the VET system and the consequences for employees. Special attention is asked for identifying good practices and approaches.

The core partners organise **focus groups** for analysing the impact of the EQF on **three specific levels**:

- trade union point of view
- in-company point of view
- educational providers point of view

Issues addressed by the focus groups:

1. collective bargaining
2. Impact of the learning outcome-approach for initial and further training
3. assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning
4. data protection vs. transparency
5. Increase flexibility in training programmes (e.g. EC VET)
6. Permeability between general, vocational and tertiary education and training
7. Quality assurance within vocational education and training (EQARF)
8. Guidance and individual career development
9. Standards for developing new skill profiles due to future skill needs
10. Mismatching (low and over qualification)

Introduction

The objective of PIN is to organize a transnational learning of organizations and people who share key questions regarding the consequences of the implementation of the EQF for the interests and rights of employees.

Although only two of the issues are not related to the educational system in general and to lifelong learning issues specifically, the chairman of the focus group should be aware that the impact on individual rights as represented by trade unions are the central issue of all issues to be addressed.

In the partner-countries the position, the role and the impact of trade unions when implementing the EQF in national learning systems are quite different, especially considering the diversity in the sectors in which the trade unions have a say when it comes to set sectoral standards for learning.

The primary focus in the focus groups is:

1. Identification of good practices in the partner-countries of implementation of the EQF,
2. Creating an overview of the knowledge needs of the stakeholders when 'working' with the EQF.

The **questionnaire** aims at the bird-eye view of the focus group-members for the sake of retrieving good practices. In this questionnaire general questions are asked about the nature of learning and the types of standards used at the moment. If possible, this questionnaire will open up information on actual use of EQF or EQF-related aspects. The questionnaire will also focus on the responsibilities of the stakeholders. In this questionnaire the diversity of roles in applying EQF and EQF-related aspects will be highlighted.

The **guidelines** are:

1. **Variety of stakeholders**
Make sure there is a variety of stakeholders represented in the focus group: trade-unions staff and members, VET-policy-makers and teachers, negotiators of sectoral standards, etc
2. **Diversity**
Keep in mind that the EQF has been designed to give the huge variety of European systems a place. So there is no need for unifying the different systems but more finding out how to manage the diversity of national/sectoral learning systems or approaches.
3. **Information of the EQF**
You might want to introduce the EQF to your focus group. For this you can either use national information, or the brochure the European Commission has available in almost any language: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm
4. **Chairman**
Make sure that the **chairman** acts as an independent mediator of the debate in the focus group.
5. **Documentation**
Make careful notes of the outcomes of the debate; these notes will provide the information needed for WP3 and will also be used to do further research into good practices.
6. **National solutions**
In explaining the EQF, make clear that there might be different views of the impact of the EQF in the different partner-countries and amongst the different stakeholders. Articulate these differences in the debate with the focus group.
7. **National and sectoral standards**

Prepare for explaining to the focus group the diversity of national and sectoral standards used in your country. This entails making a short analysis of the information delivered by the focus group-members in the preparing questionnaire on good practices and their respective responsibilities.

What we expect from the work of the focus groups:

1. A written and detailed report answering questions 1 to 8 of the questionnaire.
2. Please use the structure of the questionnaire for your report. This makes it easier for us to compare the national reports.
3. The report of the first focus group meeting (National impact analysis) should be submitted to IGM and Cofora until September 15th. The report of the second meeting until November 30th.
4. Prepare on the basis of the existing information from the questionnaires a kind of format for the debate(s) in the focus group. It is recommended to use the order of the questions in the questionnaires as an agenda for the focus groups.
5. Make sure that you ask feedback after the focus group to the individual members. This is to make sure that the information you got out of the focus group will be transparent and concrete in naming good practices and stakeholders' responsibilities in your country.

Questionnaire on national policy and good practices

This questionnaire will be issued to the focus group-members before the focus group is organized. It will be used as a guide for debate.

1. NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM

1a. What are the main characteristics of the national qualifications system?

(Describe levels, types of official qualifications, system, organization, structure of the qualifications)

ANSWER

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a system of ten levels. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence i.e. what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning. It recognises through the framework learning from the very initial stages to the most advanced stages and all such learning may be achieved in schools or colleges at work or in the home or community.

A “fan diagram” has been produced showing the ten levels of the framework and showing the organisations responsible for ensuring the quality of the awards. These organisations are:

Secondary Schools – Level 3, 4 and 5

FETAC – Level 1 to 6

HETAC – Level 6 to 10

IT Institutes of Technology) – Level 6 to 10

Universities – Level 7 to 10

With the exception of the Secondary Schools all must develop their own policies and procedures for accreditation of prior learning.

Legislation currently going through the Dail (Parliament) is designed to create only one body to deal with all awards.

1b. Do you have a National Qualifications Framework, in which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is integrated?

If yes, describe the NQF and the reasons for establishing an NQF. If not, what actions are undertaken towards establishing a national qualifications framework?

Focus on actions like:

- *reasons for shifting to national standard*
- *reasons accepting a focus on learning outcomes*
- *Coordination and governance issues*
- *Quality assurance issues*
- *Transferability, progression, access and permeability*

ANSWER

Non formal and informal learning is recognised with the framework referred to above where learning may be achieved in work or in the home or community.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a system of ten levels and is used to describe the Irish qualifications system.

A 'fan diagram' has been developed which helps to illustrate the levels on the NFQ and each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence i.e. what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning. This section provides information on each level and information on the award-types.

An awarding body is a national body that has the legal power to make an award in order to recognise learning. This section identifies the awarding bodies whose qualifications are in the NFQ.

A key element of the NFQ is to improve access (entry) to education and training, transfer within and between education and training and progression within and between education and training.

The Qualifications Authority has put in place policies for the awards of professional bodies to be recognised through the NFQ.

Quality Assurance is central to the recognition of any qualification through the NFQ. The quality assurance functions of the Awards Councils (i.e., FETAC and HETAC), the DIT and the universities are detailed here. The role of the Qualifications Authority, in terms of the review of the Awards Councils and the DIT, is also detailed.

The introduction of the NFQ has provided a tool by which qualifications gained outside the State can be recognised. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland provides a service called Qualifications Recognition, which provides employers and recruiters with a means of comparing and contrasting foreign qualifications with qualifications in the Irish system. This service is free of charge and is an advisory service that can assist in determining eligibility of qualifications for employment

The NFQ, whilst a national development, is also linked to similar initiatives that are taking place in other countries and at an overall European level. This section includes an overview of the Bologna Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework and how Europass seeks to increase the mobility of both learners and workers across Europe.

1c. Does the qualification system in your country include assessing learning outcomes from the education sector, the labour market and the voluntary sector (non-profit organizations, sports associations, associations for voluntary social work etc., ICT courses, creative courses, liberal adult education for personal development etc.)?

If possible, can you describe examples?

ANSWER

It is intended to cover all sectors.

1d. What impact does the implementation and use of EQF have on your field of work:

- **Does it influence (and in what respect) your policy of collective bargaining?**
- **Does it influence the legal position of the employee?**
- **How do you value the problem of data protection vs. transparency?**

ANSWER:

The EQF has the benefit of motivating both workers and employers through the fact that the outcomes of the training has reached a certain standard.

In Ireland the EQF has no influence on the legal position of employees

There is mixed view on this and no definitive answer can be given at this time.

1e. What kind of offers are in your country with regard to guidance and individual career development and the assessment of competences? Please name organisations and conditions (fees, costs...)!

ANSWER

There is a state run website Qualifax which provides free information on careers. Its mainly aimed at school leavers. There are a number of private career guidance companies but prices are not readably available. Mentoring is available within Failte Ireland in relation to applications for accreditation of prior learning within the hospitality industry.

2. LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY AND LEGISLATION

2a. What is the nature of lifelong learning policy in your country? What are the goals? Which problems is it expected to solve?

Focus on responsible actors/stakeholders, who takes initiatives, what are the reasons for these actors to act?

ANSWER

The Framework of Qualifications has as its aim to recognition of all learning achievement and it does this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications. The purpose of this support is to allow entry to existing programmes, credit towards awards and eligibility for a full award.

2b. Is there a policy on recognition of non-formal and informal learning practiced as an element in the lifelong learning policy?

For instance as a means for motivating adults for lifelong learning?

ANSWER

Each institution has its own policy.

2c. Are all education sectors cooperating in creating lifelong learning programmes?

ANSWER

All have a policy which they use on each of their course most universities have developed courses specifically for lifelong learning. These include DCU (Dublin City University) which operates a distance EQF – Praxis and Information Network PIN - 510698-2010-LLP-DE-Leonardo-LNW

learning programme called OSCAIL. In most cases there are no entry requirements if the participant is over 23 years of age

2d. Is there national legislation for lifelong learning? Or is lifelong learning regulated on a sectoral level?

ANSWER

Yes. The Qualification (Education and Training) Act 1999

2e. On the national level: What are your experiences with regard to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning?

ANSWER

It is a difficult process. In response to questions arising from this project Universities asked could not state how many applicants for their course sought accreditation of prior learning. In response to similar questions to provide providers who normally use FETAC almost no one processed applications.

2f. On the companies/trade unions/training organisations level: Are there any examples for good practice? Please describe!

ANSWER

Faite Ireland is an example of good practice. They have a brochure encouraging people to see accreditation for prior learning and provide mentoring support to applicants.

3. ROLES IN THE LEARNING-PROCESS

3a. Which kind of lifelong learning-practices are functioning in your country? Do they include summative (aiming at qualification/certification) and/or formative (aiming at career-perspectives) approaches?

ANSWER

It is normally summative

3b. What is the responsibility of the adult learner in designing his/her learning process?

ANSWER

This varies from provider to provider. Analysing each provider's procedures and requirements is beyond the scope of this report.

3c. What is the role of social partners (employers and trade unions) in the learning process to build up competencies sustainably?

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ANSWER

Trade Unions have adopted policy in relation to Life Long Learning and Skills development. SIPTU, Irelands largest trade union, has policy in this area including a policy to work with social partners including the Government and state agencies to promote the concept of Life Long Learning. The demise of National Consensus arising out of the economic crisis has reduced the role of social partners on government decision making.

3d. What are your strategies concerning Life long learning with regard to target groups (young, old, low-qualified, men and women...)?

ANSWER

Ideas Institute contributes to life long learning by developing courses to meet the need of individuals and companies and delivering these at times that are suitable to all concerned. Ideas has a policy regarding accreditation of prior learning through its quality agreement with FETAC

3e. What runs good or not?

ANSWER

For us provision of training has been very successful in its impact on low skilled workers, older workers and women. All of our interventions have been as a result of collective bargaining where we are welcomed by both sides of industry. The fact that our courses are accredited has been an advantage.

In Ideas Institute we believe that success requires:

1. That the intervention be as a result of collective bargaining
2. That the courses be accredited
3. That the outcomes be linked to job security.

4. NON-FORMAL AND FORMAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

4a. In how far are people supported in non-formal learning? What are the instruments and kinds of support?

ANSWER

Failte Ireland encourages people employed in the hospitality industry to gain credits for non formal learning and in the process identifies other learning necessary to benefit the individual.

4b. Is there a praxis in your country to assign EC VET credit points?

ANSWER

Yes: ECTS

4c. In how far does EC VET increase flexibility of training programs?

ANSWER

The general view is that it does provide flexibility but we have little data to back up that statement.

4d. How do you identify (what methods do you use?) skill profiles due to future skill needs?

ANSWER

Curriculum development at the lower levels of the framework is dealt with by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). At the higher levels the Universities, Institutes of Technology develop their own curriculum. At HETAC and FETAC level curriculum is developed by accredited providers and approved by the Boards of both organisations. The Boards are made up of representatives of the Social Partners.

4e. In how far does this influence the formulation of curricula?

ANSWER

See above

4f. What are your quality assurance standards within education and training (EQARF)?

Each of the organisations charged with overseeing education and training in their area sets their own quality assurance standards. These must be met by providers of training delivering course that are accredited by that organisation. For example the FETAC quality assurance system is based on the EQARF

5. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

5a. What are the tools/instruments/methods used for the identification (e.g. portfolio, interview, demonstration, self-assessment) of competences? What kinds of proof can be submitted?

ANSWER

Each organisation (e.g FETAC, HETAC etc) is allowed to set its own methods of assessment. For example FETAC require providers to follow a set of steps as follows:

1. Identify the Award
2. Determine Eligibility
3. Analyse Knowledge, Skills and Competence
4. Gather Evidence
5. Assess Evidence
6. Make a recommendation

Each provider must make available its own mentoring service.

Failte Ireland on the other hand requires applicants to put together a portfolio and provide a mentor.

5b. How is informal learning measured and validated? To what extent can validation use the same standards and references as formal education and training? If not, what other standards are used - job, or sectoral (branch)?

ANSWER

Applicants must meet the standard set for the award they are seeking.

5c. What kind of advice/feedback may be made by assessors or mentors, counsellors, peers examiners?

It depends on the awarding body. As mentioned above Failte Ireland provide a mentoring service which provides feedback and advice but no such requirement is made in the FETAC guidelines.

6. SWOT

6a. Which strengths are facing your country's learning system when it comes to implementing the EQF?

Focus on sustainability issues, cost-benefit issues, ethical issues, transferability between sectors and EQF-related aspects.

ANSWER

We already have a fully functioning Framework of Qualifications aligned with many EU countries.

6b. Which weaknesses are facing your country's learning system when it comes to implementing the EQF?

Focus on sustainability issues, cost-benefit issues, ethical issues, transferability between sectors and EQF-related aspects.

ANSWER

Our current weakness is the multiplicity of organisations offering awards. This is being addressed in legislation currently going through parliament. (Dail)

6c. Which opportunities are facing your country's learning system when it comes to implementing the EQF?

Focus on sustainability issues, cost-benefit issues, ethical issues, transferability between sectors and EQF-related aspects.

ANSWER

The opportunity to become the leader in the delivery of high quality training to EU citizens using a framework recognised in each country.

6d. Which threats are facing your country's learning system when it comes to implementing the EQF?

Focus on sustainability issues, cost-benefit issues, ethical issues, transferability between sectors and EQF-related aspects

ANSWER

The Multiplicity of organisations and complexity of dealing with RPL

7. Thematic outline

7a. On page 1 there are 10 issues (themes) formulated: Are these addressed issues relevant or not relevant for you?

ANSWER

We held three focus groups. A copy of the responses are available for inspection.

Adressed issues	Relevant 3	Less relevant 2	Not relevant 1
Collective bargaining			
Impact of the learning outcome-approach for initial and further training			
Assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning			
Data protection vs. transparency			
Increase flexibility in training programmes (e.g. EC VET)			
Permeability between general, vocational and tertiary education and training			
Quality assurance within vocational education and training (EQARF)			
Guidance and individual career development			
Standards for developing new skill profiles due to future skill needs			
Mismatching (low and over qualification)			

Please explain the reasons for your rating!

7b. On page 1 there are 10 issues (themes) formulated: From your national point of view what else issues are relevant for you in the process of implementation and use of EQF? Please give us a detailed description. Do you have any approaches (strategies or experiences) to solve these challenges?

ANSWER

Question 1

Trainers and Union Officials both gave a 3 mark to this question however employers were divided with 50% giving a score of 3 and the remainder divided between 2 and 1.

The general view was that through collective bargaining arrangements could be made to meet future skills needs and enhance workers position.

Question 2

All participants agreed that this was relevant especially in the area of community and health care training.

Question 3

All agreed that this was relevant and the suggestion was made that we could identify core skills and use these to evaluate needs. Teamwork was offered as an example.

Question 4

The majority felt this was relevant however some employers felt it was not relevant and some trade union officials felt it was less relevant. A suggestion was the introduction of skills cards allowing individuals to have a record of their achievements.

Question 5

Everybody agreed that increased flexibility in courses would be a good thing.

Question 6

Employers were split between it being relevant and less relevant.

Trainers and Trade Union officials felt it was relevant and gave as an example the BBS course run by UCD.

Question 7

Everyone agreed that this was relevant and offered praise for the Irish QA systems in place. The gave as an example a training company called Empower Training that was put out of business because the lost their QA agreement with FETAC through bad practices.

Question 8

75% of employers said this was less relevant. All Union Officials felt this was relevant and only one trainer felt it was less relevant.

Question 9

50% of employers said this was relevant with the remaining divided between less relevant and not relevant. Examples of good practice given were the Food FIT project and an upskilling project at the Sennheiser company.

Question 10

75% of employers felt this was relevant with 25% saying it was less relevant. Trainers and officials all felt it was relevant and said that lack of training was effecting promotional prospects.

8. Information and support by PIN

8a. What information do you expect from PIN, from a trade union , in company and educational providers point of view?

Answer

Clear information as to what is required by the EU and what is practiced elsewhere in Europe.

8b. What support do you need?

ANSWER

RON YOU NEED TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION AS IT MIGHT IMPACT ON OTHER PROJECTS YOU HAVE PLANNED.