

Mr. J. Figel'
Member of the European Commission

The Hague	Ref.	Your letter of	Your reference
22 December 2005	BVE/I&I/2005/59992	20 July 2005	MG/D(2005) 12829
Subject	Appendix		
European Qualifications Framework	Results national consultation		

Dear Mr. Figel',

In your letter of 20 July 2005 (reference MG/D(2005) 12829), you asked me to organise a national consultation on the European Commission's proposal for a European Qualifications Framework. This consultation took place in the Netherlands over the last few months. During this consultation, which included representatives of educational institutes, organisations for employers and employees, sectoral organisations and experts in the field of education and employment, I managed to obtain answers to the questions that you raised. Please find the answers in Annex 1.

The initiative to develop a European framework for the international comparison of national qualifications has been welcomed. The Dutch stakeholders support the objective to encourage mobility on the European labour market. Developing an EQF can make a positive contribution to this. Recommendations were also made for the further development of the EQF to ensure that this objective is eventually achieved. I would like to discuss the three most important recommendations in more detail.

Objective of the EQF:

Reflecting on the EQF proposal, the education community in the Netherlands raised a question about the objective. It discerned two options:

1. stimulating international comparison of national qualifications and
2. testing individual competencies for the benefit of life-long learning.

The use of the eight reference levels in relation to these two objectives has been the subject of detailed discussions in the Netherlands. The consultation process showed that agreement will be reached on the first objective. The Dutch stakeholders have a preference for using the eight reference levels as a point of reference for the international comparison of national qualifications. For this objective, the general concept of describing qualifications, or acquired competences, in terms of learning outcomes has been welcomed. The second objective, testing competences at individual level on the basis of these reference levels, is not considered feasible. Further differentiation at national and sectoral level is required in order to reach this objective. The testing and recognition of competencies at individual level, either formally or informally, should take place based on national standards. Subsequently, these recognised competencies (qualifications) can be compared to other countries using the EQF. Instruments such as the Europass are of importance in this respect. Creating an effective intrinsic relationship between the eight reference levels and instruments such as the Europass represents a major challenge for further development of the EQF.

Linking the EQF to a specific professional context:

Vocational education occupies its own, important, position within the Dutch educational system, starting with VMBO (preparatory vocational education), MBO (vocational education) and leading to higher professional education. The social partners and sectors are closely involved in formulating qualifications. The relationship with professional practice is therefore strongly supported in the Netherlands. Given the objective of the EQF to provide added value for the European labour market, Dutch stakeholders stress the importance of creating links between the EQF and specific professional practice. It has been proposed to do this by:

- fine tuning the descriptors for the eight reference levels taking account of the relevance for the labour market;
- by asking countries to integrate professional requirements into their national qualifications;
- requesting various sectors at European level to apply the EQF principles into their sectoral qualifications.

This would contribute to the understanding of the EQF by the labour market while preventing it from becoming a detailed, bureaucratic instrument.

Relationship with the Framework of Qualifications for the Higher Education Area:

The last point that I would like to raise in this letter is the relationship between the higher education framework, which originated from the Bologna process, and the EQF as it has now been proposed. The link between both frameworks is explained in Annex 3 of the proposal. However, for describing the reference levels different descriptors were used (for higher education the so-called Dublin descriptors). The Dutch stakeholders therefore thought that the relationship between both frameworks was unclear. In addition, I have noticed that this is not in accordance with the request that the Ministers of Education submitted to the European Commission. This request was that even though the Bologna and Copenhagen processes have their own administrative approaches, the results of both processes should contribute to a single European qualification framework (Maastricht, December 2004). You are therefore requested to agree on the contents of a proposal which is in line with the Bologna process for higher education with the aim of creating a single integrated European qualification framework.

Answers have been given in Annex 1 to the questions that were raised in the consultation document. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you every success with the processing of the results of the European-wide consultation process and look forward to examining the adjusted proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Minister of Education, Culture and Science
Maria J.A. van der Hoeven