Creation of a European qualifications framework

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PURPOSE : to present a plan for a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. CONTENT : in March 2005 the EU Heads of States asked the Commission to examine the possible creation of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) within the context of lifelong learning. The purpose of this report is to outline the main features of a future EQF and to open a consultation process between the Commission and EU national policy-makers, social partners, stakeholders and experts.

It should be stressed that a future EQF would be developed and implemented on a voluntary basis only and would entail no legal obligations. It would be a meta-framework the purpose of which will be to increase transparency and mutual trust between educational stake-holders. The EU directive on professional qualifications adopted in June 2005 would remain the legal instrument that is binding on Member States concerning the recognition of professional qualifications in the field of the regulated professions. The development of an EQF should not be used as a tool to impose any additional requirements on the existing Directive.

In its paper the Commission proposes that a future EQF should be based on three core elements, namely:

- A set of common reference points based on eight levels.
- Reference levels supported by a range of tools and instruments addressing the needs of individual citizens. For example, an integrated European credit transfer and accumulation system for lifelong learning, the Europass instrument and the Ploteus database on learning instruments.
- Awarding the EQF a set of common principles and procedures which provide guidelines for co-operation between stake-holders at the various levels. Particular focus would be given to quality assurance, validation, guidance and key responsibilities.

Regarding the eight levels, each level would be awarded a qualification based on three types of learning outcomes namely, knowledge, skills and wider competences. The learning outcomes do not include details of specific qualifications given that these are a national or sectoral responsibility.

In preparing this structure the Commission has sought to create a framework that encourages co-operation between the various actors. Given that a future EQF would be voluntary in nature and would not entail any legal obligations, its success depends on the level of commitment to the framework from the various stakeholders who operate at different levels. To optimise co-operation and mutual trust the paper proposes the establishment of a single ?National Framework of Qualifications? which in turn would be linked to a single ?National Framework to the EQF?. Such a system would allow each country to put in place a process whereby existing qualification structures are linked to the EQF.

In presenting this paper the Commission asks all interested parties to submit their views and opinions on the future structure of a European Qualification Framework. In order for it to be a success it needs to be both relevant and credible. The views of stakeholders are therefore vital. The questions posed by the Commission to stake-holders include, inter alia:

- What is needed to make the EQF work in practice?
- Does the 8-level reference structure sufficiently capture the complexity of life-long learning in Europe?
- How can a National Qualification Framework for lifelong learning be developed?
- How can the EQF contribute to the development of mutual trust between stakeholders?