EDU WORLD 2018
The 8th International Conference

EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK (EQF) - RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTONOMY DOMAIN; MEANINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Dan Potolea (a), Steliana Toma (b)*
*Corresponding author

(a) University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Panduri Bd, no. 90, Bucharest, RO, dpotolea@yahoo.com
(b) University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Teachers Training Department, Lacul Tei Bd, no.124, Bucharest, RO, steliana@tif.ro

Abstract

The EQF has been inspiring, for nearly a decade, the professionalization researches and the national policies for defining qualifications. Of the three domains of the EQF: knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy, especially *responsibility and autonomy* would require, from our point of view, a critical examination due to the open issues that it incorporates. The study performs a content analysis of the two EQF documents highlighting key terms and critical issues. The authors try to differentiate the two terms, responsibility and autonomy, analyze their relations and their position within the *competence* concept. The study supports the idea that responsibility and autonomy cannot work in a vacuum, apart from reporting to the type of working/learning task to be solved. It proposes two matrices that put into question four types of work/learning tasks with four degrees of control/ independence; some matrices implications for the competence development and its demonstration are explored, as well. It is expected that this approach will help te description of the qualifications, and allow a broader discussion around the EQF and consequently improve its efficiency and acceptance by the different stakeholders.

Keywords: EQF, learning outcomes, competence, responsibility, autonomy, working/learning task.

1. Introduction

1.1. The importance and legitimacy of European Qualifications Framework

The description and the assessment of the competences which define a qualification is a topic that has been a priority at the international level. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has been inspiring, for a decade, the researches and national policies for defining qualifications. It may be assumed that the EQF-2008 (European Commission, 2008) accelerated this tendency by promoting a lot of discussions and projects around the relationships between the learning outcomes and desired competences that define a given qualification, strengthening the necessity of developing national qualifications frameworks.

The fundamental purpose of the EQF system is to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications (European Commission, 2017, p.1). The EQF system is structured in terms of learning outcomes and qualification levels hierarchically organized on 8 levels, characterized by three domains of descriptors. The EQF does not impose the 8 qualification levels; what matters is the reporting of each national level to one of the EQF levels; it has the value of a meta-framework to which existing systems can be compared or which may inspire the revision or design of new national qualifications systems.

2. Problem Statement

10 years of use of the EQF raises the question of whether accumulated experiences and associated reflections justify some reconsideration, corrections or developments. Our point of view is that in the two variants (EQF-2008 and EQF-2017) persist some critical elements of conceptual and internal validity. So, we are, primarily, interested in the quality of the theoretical model: fundamentals, levels, and characteristics that differentiate the descriptors of each level and between levels, and, secondly, in the practice of implementing the EQF.

3. Research Questions

- What are the similarities and differences between the EQF-2008 and the EQF-2017?
- Is EQF-2017 a theoretical and methodological progression to the initial version, EQF-2008?
- Is it possible to overcome some critical issues associated with the third area of learning outcomes, *responsibility and autonomy*?

4. Purpose of the Study

For the purpose of the present paper, we are focusing on the next specific objectives:

- To identify the similarities and differences between the EQF-2008 and the EQF-2017;
- To answer the question whether the EQF-2017 represents a theoretical and methodological advancement to the original version;
- To identify critical issues associated with the third area of learning outcomes, *responsibility and autonomy* (R&A);

To propose another approach to R&A and highlight the possible consequences of two matrices.

5. Research Methods

The basic method is the content analysis of core documents, EQF-2008 and EQF-2017, of other EU documents and specialized studies; besides, the authors have experienced, in over 10 years, a lot of training and research activities arising from EQF documents and from different legislative changes that have occurred in connection with competence based education, professional teachers' standards and the development of Romanian Qualification Framework for Higher Education. (Potolea, Toma, Zaharia, Mironov, & Borzea, 2007; Zaharia, Potolea, Toma, & Murgescu, 2010; Toma, 2013).

6. Findings

6.1. EQF - 2008 and EQF -2017: constant, revisions, open issues

6.1.1. The comparative analysis of the two variants is summarized in the table below (Table 01).

Table 01. Comparative analysis of EQF - 2008 and EQF - 2017

Structure	EQF - 2008	EQF - 2017
Rationale and background	Separate section on the importance and structure of the EQF, types of descriptors, legislative basis, etc.	The reference framework does not benefit from an autonomous section; The design and structure elements are presented along with other items on the implementation of the EQF system
Recommen-dations sequences	- Recommendations for Member States; - Approval of the European Commission's initiatives	Several users are nominated and therefore there are more frequent sequences: recommendations for Member States, relations with national contexts, recommendations for the Council of Europe in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders in the EQF advisory group, recommendations to the Commission
Annexes	3 Annexes: definitions, EQF levels descriptors, common principles for quality assurance in higher education and in vocational training	6 Annexes: definitions, EQF levels descriptors, criteria and procedures for referencing NQFs to the EQF, quality assurance principles for qualifications, principles for credit systems, elements for data fields for the electronic publication of information with an EQF level.

6.1.2. Similarities

▪ The EQF-2008 and EQF-2017 basically rely on the same conception of the structure and importance of the EQF: focusing on learning outcomes, 8 levels of qualification, 3 domains of differentiated descriptors for each level, principles close to implementation;

▪ V1 and V2, in particular V2, pay attention more to EQF implementation management and are less interested in the quality of the EQF system: clarification of basic concepts, valid differentiation of qualification levels, functional relationships between the three domains. These are already considered clarified and EQF documents refer to the best procedures to ensure the relevant comparability between the different qualification systems.

▪ In the center of the EQF, 2008 and 2017, there is the EQF level descriptors table (Annex II);

- Layer levels and level descriptors are the same, with one exception;
- The 2008 and 2017 EQF Annexes are not complementary or optional, but essential elements for the substantiation and robustness of the comparative process.

6.1.3. Differences

- The differences between V1 and V2 are quantitative and qualitative**.** EQF-2017, (V2), is better developed, with a wider register of possible beneficiaries (comparative analysis of qualifications defined by international bodies and professionalisation systems in third world countries);

- V2 diversifies the set of necessary procedures: referencing criteria, credit system, extension of quality assurance principles, a common format for publishing the results of the referencing proces.

As we have seen, two plans are relevant to the analysis and assessment of the EQF consistency: a) the EQF system plan that includes concepts and tools; b) the EQF system use plan, which addresses the management of EQF applications.

From our point of view, in recent years, efforts have focused on the consistent application of the EQF in order to benefit from all the benefits of comprehension analysis based on the EQF. The quality of applications cannot, however, be dissociated from the quality of the concept and the investigative tools. In this regard, we can ask ourselves whether the EQF levels and descriptors' schematics bring/raise open issues that could justify some revisions or additions. A critical issue is about terminology and conceptual relationships: What is *autonomy and responsibility*? In what relationships are they? A second problem may relate to the extent to which some descriptors occupy a valid position. The third, and perhaps the most important, problem concerns the internal and external coherence of *responsibility and autonomy* as a learning outcomes domain. Of the three categories of issues, in the present context, we are mainly concerned with the third: responsibility and autonomy - EQF 2017.

If we compare the EQF-2008 descriptor table (Annex II) with the EQF-2017 Annex II, we find that they are identical, with one exception. In the 2017 version, the items corresponding to the eight ranges, including the third field, are the same, unchanged; only the head of the third column was changed! In EQF-2017, the difference lies **in giving up the term of** *competence*.

- The third area of learning outcomes is no longer called *competence/autonomy and responsibility* but *responsibility and autonomy*. We have no explanation about the new option. Is it a change of label? Why are R & A terms reverting to the original A & R? Can we have a qualification program where the synthetic outcome of learning, competence, may be lacking? Sometimes, the text displays *skills and competences*, but not as a distinct learning outcome within a specific model. All of us know that the current trend in training programs is to establish sets of competence: general, specific, transversal. Can a qualifying reference framework ignore the competence issue? Appendix I includes the definition of competence, but its features are not found in the texture of the model.

- The current configuration of the EQF-2017 cannot be understood unless we study the processes and documents that prepared the adoption of the document in 2017. This could also provide some partial answers to some of the questions we have formulated. After 8 years of effective use of the EQF - 2008, the European Commission produced în 2016 a "Proposal..." (European Commission, 2016). It was appreciated that the EQF represents "a significant driver in the development of NQF", 39 countries using the EQF as a translation grid between national qualifications systems. It was noted, as well, that despite the success of

its implementation, "its objectives on the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications have not been fully reached" (European Commission, 2016, p.3). The conclusion of the "Proposal..." is that of the need to revise the EQF-2008 and 13 changes are proposed; the most important we mentioned earlier, too. The first recommended change is: *"The term competence,... as a type of learning outcome is replaced with responsibility and autonomy - to be more faithful to the corresponding learning outcomes descriptors"* (European Commission, 2016, p.13). But we doubt that the exclusion of the term *competence* from the major learning outcomes is a way of clarifying the concept. Can the *competence* be simply replaced by *responsibility and autonomy*? We doubt again. Most opinions on *competence* consider attitude alongside other factors to be only a component of competence. We also, do not believe that replacing *competence* with *responsibility and autonomy* contributes to increasing the prestige and fidelity of relevant learning descriptors.

6.2. Responsibility versus autonomy

Given that *responsibility and autonomy* becomes the third fundamental area of learning outcomes, their meanings and explanations should be explored systematically. What is *responsibility and autonomy*? If we look at the definition of 2017, we find: *"Responsibility and autonomy means the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility"(EQF-2017, Annex I).* But **this definition is a tautology**! to be responsible and autonomous means to do something with responsibility and autonomy! Neither the relationship between responsibility and autonomy is clarified. Surprisingly, in Annex I-2008, this phrase *"responsibility and autonomy"* does not appear in the terms of reference. From our point of view, two ways of approach could help us to decipher the meaning of the concepts in question: content analysis of the R & A section and analysis of each of these concepts in other contexts or from other points of view.

6.2.1. Content analysis of the R & A section

Following the content analysis of EQF-2008 and EQF-2017, only the descriptors for the R & A domain were selected for each qualification level. Within the "autonomy & responsibility" domain there are two important subcategories: "autonomy" and "responsibility", each of them having its meaning. We have selected the descriptors of each one of them, separate them in two columns and then put each of them it in relation to the nature and complexity of the work/learning task and to the context in which competence is proven. (Table 02)

Table 02. Description of the EQF *responsibility* and *autonomy* domain

EQF levels	Context	Task nature and complexity	Autonomy	Responsibility
1	Structured context	Carry out simple tasks	Under direct supervision	
2		Carry out tasks and solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Under supervision with some autonomy	
3		Accomplish tasks and solve problems by	Adapt own behaviour to	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study

		selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	circumstances in solving problems	
4	Contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change	Generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts	Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and work or study activities improvement
5	Contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change	Develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities	Assume management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change. Review and develop performance of self and others
6	Unpredictable and complex work or study contexts	Solve complex technical / professional activities or projects and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making. Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
7	Work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches	Solve specialised problems in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform working and study context	Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
8	The forefront of work or study contexts including research	Solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, and autonomy in the development of new ideas or processes	Assume full responsibility, professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

6.2.2. Discussion

▪ *"Autonomy"* and *"task nature and complexity"* are described for each of the 8 levels EQF; that explain why, usually, in the NQFs analysed, the qualifications' description is clear at the two indicators.

▪ Although the third EQF category is *"responsibility and autonomy"*, for the EQF levels 1 and 2, we observe that *"responsibility"* has no descriptors; we consider that even when caring out a simple task it is expected to prove, at least, a minimum personal responsibility to protect himself, and ensure the health and safety of the work; our suggestion is to be mentioned, in the third column, *"strict limited professional responsibility"*, for EQF level 1, and *"limited professional responsibility"* for EQF level 2. As a matter of facts, in their NQFs, different countries specify, for level 1: *able to take personal decisions and act in simple, clear situations* (Denmark); or for EQF level 2: *take responsibility for accomplish own tasks. No responsibility for other* (Portugal).

▪ The *"responsibility"* descriptors refer, at different levels, to different types of responsibility: individual, professional, social, and to different component: decision-making, completion of tasks, performance of teams, management of the professional development of individuals and groups, sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts.

6.2.3. *Responsibility* and *autonomy* in other contexts or from other points of view

We propose interpretation of *autonomy* from the point of view of the *control/independence* report: how much guidance, supervision is given to the one who resolves a learning/professional task or to what extent the subject matter relies more or less on own resources in organizing and accomplishment of that task without external assistance? Surely, control/independence could be thought of as a boundary of a continuum: maximum control - maximum independence, within which we can have different combinatorial variables. Control and independence do not operate in an abstract vacuum, but in relation to something - a task or a situation to be solved. If we ignore the nature of the task or the problem to be solved, then the identity of competence is undermined.

If we accept the above premise, then it would be necessary to construct a typology of work/learning situations. Thus, some problems are algorithmic, other heuristic; some are well determined, others are poorly determined, etc. A simplified classification is the following: a) simple tasks, routines involve algorithmic solutions; b) tasks/problem solving typical, specific problems; the subject should acknowledge the fact that the matter in question belongs to a particular type of problem he has previously encountered and, on this basis, adopt the appropriate solution; c) tasks/solving critical issues for the subject, which presuppose the learning of the solving procedures; d) complex/open task/ problems that involve heuristic, creative, innovative approaches. If we relate to the control/independence indicator, then we could identify the following degrees of control/independence: maximum supervision and assistance, granted permanently; moderate supervision and assistance, on certain critical sequences; partial supervision/control; minimum or no supervision and assistance. From the combination of working/learning tasks - with degree of control/independence, the following matrix results (Table 03):

Table 03. Autonomy - working/learning task Matrix

Levels / Types	Control / independence			
	Maximum surveillance and assistance	Moderate surveillance and assistance	Partial surveillance and assistance	No surveillance and assistance
Nature and complexity of the working/ learning tasks — A. **Routine/simple tasks** and problems; algorithmic approaches				
B. **Typical tasks** and problems, analogies, similarities				
C. **Critical tasks** and problems; assume heuristic solutions				
D. **Hyper complexes tasks** and problems, advance or innovate the knowledge and domain practices				

The second term, *responsibility*, for us, in the present context, means accountability, acceptance of the consequences for decisions on the problem-solving process and the quality of the final product.

Responsibility also involves justifying actions, judgments and decisions. In the relationship between A & R, *autonomy* is the primary term because only the degree of autonomy justifies the level of responsibility. So, **we suggest the order "autonomy and responsibility" when the two concepts are used together.** In the succession of levels 1-8, the degree of supervision/control decreases and accountability increases. The interactions between control/independence and responsibility are summarizes in Table 04:

Table 04. Responsibility - working/learning task Matrix

Levels / Types	Responsibility			
	Minimum responsibility	**Shared** responsibility	**Extended** responsibility	Maximum /creative responsibility
Nature and complexity of the working/ learning tasks — A. **Routine/simple tasks**/ problems; algorithmic approaches				
B. **Typical tasks**/problems, analogies, similarities				
C. **Critical tasks** and problems; assume heuristic solutions				
D. **Hyper complexes tasks** and problems, advance or innovate the knowledge and domain practices				

We notice that the two matrices contain a number of 16 cassettes each. What would be their usefulness? Do they have any heuristic or practical value?

a) These boxes clarify more clearly not only the analytical nature of the R & A terms, but also put them in relationship. Thus, the semantic load of these concepts becomes enriched, perhaps becoming more complex and closer to real processes.

b) If the nature of the task/problem is a competence reference, analyzing the types of tasks could have implications for the definition of various types of competencies: some simple, some more complex.

c) Competence, as formulated in the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendation: *"The proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and / or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development"*, does not spontaneously or mechanically develop. Its learning goes through some stages, the boxes of the two matrices suggesting milestones and approaches to formative procedures. The basic mechanism is that of moving from a systematic control of learning to building the ability to execute or to autonomously invent the professional/learning task.

d) The evaluation may also benefit from these matrices. They can fulfill both formative and sumative evaluations. Adopting the assessment of progress in the development of a competence at different stages in relation to control/independence can identify, on the one hand, the weaknesses of the formative process and

the adoption of corrective measures and, on the other hand, it can potentiate and ensure the quality of the acquired competence.

7. Conclusion

The paper focuses on the importance of bringing research-based evidence to enrich the EQF and, consequently, the overall process of defining educational and professional competences.

As discussed in the previous sections, some of the preliminary results of the three EQF key concepts analysis: *competence, autonomy and responsibility*, already allow us to identify important theoretically and methodologically aspects in which improvement actions are needed.

Responsibility and autonomy cannot work in a vacuum, apart from reporting to the type of working/learning task to be solved. Taking into consideration the previous findings, we have tried to obtain an explicit tool to help the work of those who have to define the autonomy & responsibility component of a given competence. Each of the two matrix puts into question four types of tasks with four degrees of control/independence and with responsibility. Some matrix implications for the competence development and its demonstration are: they allow a broader discussion around the EQF and, consequently, improve its efficiency and acceptance by the different stakeholders and help the description of the qualifications and the design, development and evaluation of the educational processes.

References

European Commission (2008). The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) Luxembourg: *Office for Official Publications of the European Communities*, 2008, ISBN 978-92-79-08474-4, https://dx.doi.org/10.2766/14352

European Commission (2016). Proposal for a COUNCIL 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. Strasbourg, XXX COM(2016) 383/2, 2016/0180 (NLE). Retrieved, (at 10.10.2018) from: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160713/proposal

European Commission (2017). 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 (2017/C 189/03), *Official Journal of the European Union,* 15.06.2017. Retrieved, at 10.10.2018, from: https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/.../language..

Potolea, D., Toma, S., Zaharia, S. E., Mironov, C. M. & Borzea, A. E. (2007), *Conceptual basis for the development of the Romanian Qualification Framework for Higher Education, Bucharest:* Ed. ACPART.

Toma, S. (2013). Contributions to the Design of the Romanian Qualifications Framework, in: *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences Journal*, ISSN: 1877-0428, *76,* 44-48 https://dx.doi.org/101016

Zaharia, S.E., Potolea, D., Toma, S. & Murgescu, B. (2010). Romanian Qualification Framework for Higher Education - a component of the European Qualification Framework, in *European Journal of Qualifications*, April 2010, no.1, pp. 4-19, Ed.Scrib. Retrieved, (at 10.10.2018) from http://www.bequal.info/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&id=11%3Ajournals&Itemid=148&lang=en