

## INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESSES IN IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES OF THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KOSOVO

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### ABSTRACT

The European Union envisages and handles the economic integration process through the creation of a unified system of higher education. As part of this aspect, which is vital for the future of this community, the Heads of Governments, supported by the recommendations of the Ministers of Education and Training, a year earlier in March 2005 in Brussels, laid down the requirement for the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework as a basic and separate document, which shall not only be implemented by member countries on a voluntary basis, without conditions and without obligation, but also to increase transparency and mutual trust that will first enable the creation of a clear framework of qualifications, at the national and sectorial level as referent to one another, and secondly, this system will enable the transfer of knowledge and skills for the citizens in the European area. Along with other important documents that are in effect, there is also a current legal basis for the European integration process of this area, and the terms and conditions stipulated therein have been adequately understood by Kosovo. So far, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has issued a series of important documents and a solid base for moving forward in this direction has been created. However, the situation is complicated when the time comes for these policies to be implemented in reality. This is because there is still a lack of willingness from the management of Higher Education Providers to enhance quality, improve competence and adapt to the European minimum higher education standards required by the European Qualifications Framework. It is clearly considered as an important step forward to issue policies, but alone it remains insufficient in substance. The responsibility of implementing them lies with everyone, therefore any delay in this regard, not only damages the integration process of the country, but it also depreciates and renders a University degree as unacceptable.

**Keywords:** Qualifications Framework, higher education, competence, strategy, integration.

### INTRODUCTION

In our country, until recently, qualifications were not recognized as stimulating topics, but were rather considered only as a task of some specialized institutions of higher education, ministries or national information centers for recognition. At the same time, however, even though most policy makers of higher education and the community in general, have understood their importance to a certain degree, their recognition and implementation continues to be considered as a complex issue. Without doubt, for this reason, the qualifications are now the subject of debate in it within the higher education politics. In Europe, the Bologna Process - aiming to create the Field of Higher Education in Europe until 2010, has defined qualifications as a key aspect of its work, including two other aspects - recognition and quality assurance - which are closely related to qualifications. Not only have the qualifications now been placed at the center of political debates, but our perceptions with regard to qualifications have evolved at a considerable speed. In Europe, this quick

reassessment is reflected in the design of comprehensive national frameworks for discussing subject specifications and indirect competences centered around learning outcomes, which can be characterized what is expected by the learner/student to know, understand and do based on the qualification. While our opinion has currently advanced significantly in this regard, nevertheless based on the information that we have, at least until now, efforts have not been made to provide a comprehensive overview on these developments and measures have not been taken to integrate these standards into the national legislation on higher education. This is the reason why this publication is being written, in attempts to present the concept of qualifications as it is reflected in the current opinions and debates. The paper reviews the qualifications, which are a key element in higher education policies. Qualifications are an essential element of the Bologna Process (MEST Policy on Integration into the European Higher Education Area, as part of the project "Promotion of the Bologna Process in Kosovo" Pristina, October 2007) and of the Council of Europe program for higher education.

We believe that in Kosovo, during the past five years, partial progress has been made in recognizing qualifications and in understanding the concept of qualifications, but it is still at an undesirable level with respect to the clear relationship between the two. Therefore, much remains to be done. The paper reflects weaknesses in the scope of application of the NQF—and of the primary and secondary legislation, and attempts to reflect through arguments the need to further develop policies on implementing qualifications in any particular segment of education, especially in higher education, and to encourage policy makers and practitioners to share this understanding.

### **What is the European Qualifications Framework?**

The terminology on the content of qualifications in the field of higher education in many languages, including English, is mostly not standardized. Quite often, various subjects dealing with various scientific disciplines, in accordance with their conventional terms, more or less make careless and inappropriate use of notions on this issue, thus creating confusion in terminology and substance. In addition, the translation of some of such terms in Albanian is often considered problematic, since many users under the influence of foreign literature are forced to use the words or terms by paraphrasing them (<http://www.ehea.info>) Original title: The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report 2012). Higher education in Kosovo, as in every country in Europe, is undergoing a process of transformation and reformation. In this context, the harmonious development of a quality framework of qualifications is not only the duty of national institutions but it is also the vision and mission for EU integration of the country. On this basis, the sentence "National Qualifications Framework" (hereafter NQF) refers to a document that is closely linked to the European Qualifications Framework (hereafter EQF), the Declaration of Bologna (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>) and the Copenhagen Process (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>). With respect to the documents mentioned above, the most clear and concrete explanation on the issue of the qualifications framework can be explained only through the understanding of terms such as competence, learning outcomes; qualifications; profile; descriptors; formal education and non-institutional learning.

The term "competence" simply means expertise in a particular field. The term competence is translated and adapted from the English term "expertise" and as such is imported within the Bologna process during the development of a common framework of European qualifications on the one hand, and as part of Tuning, on the other hand. As such, the word "competence" is

set as a term that encompasses everything that has to do with certain knowledge and skills that a person has and are capable, or possess the ability, to do something (this capability includes the aforementioned expertise) (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>). It should be noted that the concept of competence can be used in two ways. In broad terms, the notion of competence includes knowledge, skills, abilities, values, attitudes, and so on., and this is the point that is accepted within this concept and within the professional and scientific literature that is widely used today. Therefore, it is clear that the literature makes substantial differences with respect to skill and knowledge. More rarely, competences are equated with knowledge and/or skills, i.e. with one of the above mentioned features, as is the case with the description of the European Qualifications Framework. Among many weaknesses that are linked to and contained within international documents in the field of education, the most notable is the inappropriate use of these terms which complicates their content as well. The professional literature in this regard, though not sufficient, is clearer in the sense that it defines more clearly certain terms which are not yet widely accepted.

If competence is analyzed in a broader sense, it can also be classified or perceived within a particular group and as such be considered as a motor skill, recognition of factors, affective factors, personality traits, social skills, agents with different competences related to knowledge, skills (including social skills), abilities, values, etc. (Ellström, P. (1997)), In this regard, it should be noted that it is rarely possible for any individual competence to be grouped into various levels. This means that before determining competences, the classification of specific competences, in terms of any of the aforementioned groups, should not be required, because such competences become, in certain cases, arbitrary, thus reducing the interconnections between competences, therefore it should be mandatory that they be specific and clearly classified in accordance with the above groups and with the idea of complementarity and coherence of individual competencies. It is a characteristic that competence is individual. Therefore, in the professional literature, we often encounter the perception that competence includes the entirety of skills and knowledge required to perform a particular job. Although the competence is considered individually, there are always reference points for measuring whether a person meets these competence requirements or not. Furthermore, certain subjects often do not use all of their competences to fulfill certain tasks or jobs i.e. a task can be performed even in the absence thereof. Based on this, a great number of tasks can be performed even without using all the competences which can be considered by the employer as necessary to perform the task. In the end, we must not forget that in relation to qualifications, which represent a formal description of acquired competences, current competences can be smaller or greater.

Learning outcomes include a clear definition of competencies, skills and/or attitudes that the learner/student should acquire during a learning period. Learning outcomes have nothing to do with the content or teaching methods, but they depend on the expected results that students should develop or acquire during the learning process, and it is based on them that content and methods are determined. Outcomes usually are written considering the minimum competences and skills that an average student must acquire and successfully complete certain units, without forgetting the possibility of a minimum and maximum grading.

Qualification is any official document certifying that the holder of the qualification has acquired certain competences, usually through a formal educational program.

## Kosovo and the National Qualifications Framework

Kosovo has made progress not only in terms of institutional policies for the recognition of the NQF - but the situation has recently improved also in the field of formal-legal regulation (National Qualifications Law no. 03 / L-060 in Article 1, where is the scope of law is defined, requires that the National Qualifications System, which is based on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), is regulated by the National Qualifications Authority (NQA).) in order to enforce the National Qualifications Framework. This document is undoubtedly deemed to be a key component of the reforms that are taking place within the system of education and training in the country. This act is intended to improve access to employment through further learning, ensuring that qualifications are in harmony with the employment requirements, to meet the requirements of learners/students of economics and those of education and training institutions. NQF is designed with a mission to support quality improvement in the development of education and training qualifications, which must be based on comparable international standards of knowledge, skills and competences supported by rigorous quality assurance. This will be made possible through a transparent process of the national qualifications system, clarifying the nature of qualifications, the interrelation of qualifications, and by providing a basis for achievement across all parts of the education and training system. In this mission, NQF will foster progress and mobility for lifelong learning through various education and training pathways. Flexible learning, focused on individual needs for employment, will provide greater opportunities for recognition of prior learning, access to assessments as well as certifications. It is important that NQF will provide a basis for cooperation and mutual understanding between the NQF and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).(<http://www.akk-ks.net>)

But the question is whether it is implemented and to what extent are the obligations, rules, and standards of this framework implemented in practice? It is considered that the current situation is not favorable. This is because so far this framework has remained only on paper and not only in the segments of higher education but in all education levels throughout.

First, we consider that there is an issue here between the standards provided in the NQF and the principle of student mobility from one study program to another program. Based on the "Erasmus+" programs, the concept of mobility is perceived as a right of students to transfer to similar or the same programs, always on the basis of competence, while here, within the national system, students transfer from one program to another, from one level to another without having all the preliminary required competences and without any modality. In addition, programs such as "Comenius" and "Leonardo da Vinci", sophisticated programs dedicated specifically to areas of competence, not only are not implemented here, but neither is even commented on the institutional and academic circles.

Second, if one analyzes statutory acts of public universities and private universities, this document is not even mentioned at all in them. In particular, the Statutes of Higher Education Providers, specifically when it comes to the selection and advancement of teachers, provide no explicit provision that requires reviewing committees to apply the Law on National Qualifications or the NQF standards during the candidates evaluation process.

Third, the University of Pristina and other newly established public universities, in the absence of legal provisions, have begun to develop and issue some regulations on the basis of which they are making efforts to at least regulate the procedures and affirm the standards of selecting and appointing academic staff. However, surprisingly these acts do not contain any

provision for the need to respect qualifications, specifically the Law on National Qualifications and the NQF. The situation becomes even graver considering that until a few years ago the diplomas earned here, except for the scientific the grade acquired, did not contain any other information on the candidate's profile, which ultimately determines their competence. In these institutions, there are many instances when a professor with a Dr.sc. degree, of the Insurance Marketing profile, is engaged in teaching the macro and micro economics classes, statistics and tourism, which is a flagrant violation of all laws, EQF and NQF.

Fourth, neither MEST, nor the Kosovo Accreditation Agency, or the National Qualifications Authority, have an institutional mechanism to check all these defects every single time, in order to ensure adherence to the law, the EQF and NQF standards, and to raise the quality and respect of qualifications.

Fifth, higher education providers, although they managed to accredit their study programs at certain levels, have not established mechanisms to monitor to what extent are student qualifications compatible with the market requirements and how competent are the graduates of such institutions with the conditions of the socio-economic life;

The National Qualifications Authority is an independent public body established in accordance with the law on the National Qualifications in Kosovo. NQA was established by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) and shall function in agreement with the Office of the Prime Minister and other relevant ministries. This body was established as a result of the adoption of the Law on Qualifications. Its responsibility is to oversee the national qualifications parallel with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency and other professional bodies that are established for this purpose by government decision. It specifically has the following responsibilities with respect to professional qualifications: define the types and levels of certificates and diplomas, which will be included in NQF; approve the proposed qualifications for inclusion in the NQF (approve standards arrangements, assessment and certification, for each qualification in NQF); accredit and monitor assessment bodies; withdraw the accreditation from irresponsible bodies, if necessary; conduct external quality assurance, leading to the award of qualifications at NQF; handle complaints/appeals by candidates regarding controversial decisions of assessment; approve the certificates and diplomas issued for qualifications in the NQF; maintain a database and verifiable documentary evidence of qualifications in the NQF, certificates and diplomas awarded. All qualifications in the NQF should have clear outcomes, which are subject to evaluation in order to ensure quality. Institutions/different providers can submit their qualifications for inclusion in the framework, while the National Qualifications Authority will decide which vocational qualifications can be entered in the National Qualifications Framework (<http://www.akk-ks.net>).

### **Institutional role and responsibilities in implementing the EQF and NQF**

As noted above, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, based on the Bologna Declaration, the European Qualifications Framework, the Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Union, (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region of European Treaty, no. 165, Joint Convention of the Council of Europe - UNESCO) on the web - in MEST site:

<http://www.akk>

[ks.net/uploads/files/zhvillimi\\_dhe\\_verifikimi\\_i\\_standardeve\\_profesionale.pdf](http://www.akk-ks.net/uploads/files/zhvillimi_dhe_verifikimi_i_standardeve_profesionale.pdf))has managed



to establish the National Qualifications Authority as an independent professional institution and bring a series of systematic and legal acts in order to regulate the issue of qualifications in the country pursuant to most affirmed standards in the EU. Furthermore, based on arguments, certain weaknesses were presented, concluding that the actual situation is not enviable at all, if not alarming. To remedy the situation, it is necessary to involve all parties responsible. In this regard, the following proposals are offered:

### ***The role and duties of state institutions***

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is the key authority and central regulator who has the obligation of analyzing, planning and ensuring the implementation of policies for all levels of education in the country. In addition, its responsibility is irreplaceable in terms of adaptation of these policies and legislation with those of the most important European documents, in this case especially with the EQF ( Further information on international cooperation can be found at : <http://www.masht.gov.net/advCms/#id=1262> (last visited on 25 June 2014)). Given the condition in which higher education is currently, it is proposed that MEST, based on the strategic document it possesses, to:

- Order higher education providers, through Administrative Instructions, to strictly adhere to the requirements envisaged in the NQF, and create mechanisms for measuring and analyzing the relationship between qualifications – competence –and the market;
- Establish, under the patronage of the Minister, a task force which will comprise of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency, the National Qualifications Authority and representatives of all higher education providers, to jointly coordinate and implement standards and obligations arising from the NQF;
- Conduct workshops with stakeholders for the purpose of overall implementation of the NQF in the country;
- Increase the powers of the inspectorate in order to control and investigate abusive actions in this function;
- Increase the budget for the establishment of these mechanisms and the full implementation of the NQF.

### ***National Qualifications Authority***

The National Qualifications Authority is the institution which has the primary legal duty to implement the NQF. The NQF supports its activity in three resource packs which provide detailed guidance for the development and implementation of professional qualifications based on the criteria of the National Qualifications Authority: Guidance on Developing VET Standards; Qualification Guide to VET; Guidelines on Quality Assurance in VET institutions; Occupational Standards; Qualifications and Credits; Quality Assurance (<http://www.akk-ks.net>). The recommendations made for MEST also apply to this institution. The National Qualifications Authority still needs to strengthen its role in the executive aspect. Until now, its role is not present enough on the ground.

### ***Kosovo Accreditation Agency***

KAA is competent to perform the accreditation of institutions and of academic programs through formal and transparent procedures that envisage internationally comparable standards. Such institutions, and programs that they offer, are evaluated to ensure that they meet the

minimum requirements for quality. Accreditation is provided to all stakeholders, Kosovo and foreign, whose quality of teaching and learning meet international standards. Accreditation also increases transparency in the complex market of national and international higher education, of both public and private ([www.akreditimi-ks.org](http://www.akreditimi-ks.org)). Given its authority, KAA should require the providers of higher education, in addition to abovementioned requirements on providing educational programs, to further require the establishment and functioning of centers of competence and excellence within their units.

### ***The role and responsibilities of higher education providers***

The role of higher education stakeholders is central to the scope of the NQF. Despite the current impetus to establish new public universities as well as the existence of a number of private university institutions, the segment of higher education must by all means preserve the quality. This is precisely the mission of such stakeholders. But with respect to the question if the situation is as we want it to be, the answer is no. All providers of higher education, some to a greater extent and some less, and some not at all, have currently transformed themselves into institutions having a teaching component that is not combined with practical teaching, scientific contribution and cooperation with international strategic partners. Therefore, the creation of strategies on quality with the stated components is only prerequisite to enforce the NQF. It is the final moment to have a synchronization of policies, strategies, laws and increased awareness in order to adhere to the NQF. Adherence to it will determine the quality, location and reputation of higher education providers.

### **CONCLUSION**

Higher education, scientific research and innovation make up the essential elements of the social and economic development of a country in terms of a knowledge-based economy. The National Strategy for Development and Higher Education in Kosovo (2005 - 2015) recognizes the primary role of higher education and aims to further reform the higher education system in order to be in line with European standards and in accordance with the Bologna Process as well as the development priorities of higher education in the European Union. The priorities of Europe2020 on growth and development, particularly those on higher education, research and innovation, are also valid for Kosovo and other countries aspiring to join the EU.

Society and the institutions of the country should be attentive and responsive to the overall changes in society, economy and politics throughout the process of democratization and prospects of EU membership. Higher education in Kosovo is in constant transformation and reform from a state-controlled system to a liberalized system of higher education. Among the most important processes have occurred are the implementation of the Bologna Process and the efforts to become part of a European Higher Education Area and of the European Research Area. Despite the progress achieved, the implementation process of the NQF is still considered challenging. Currently there are clear strategies, policies and a sound legal basis in place to foster a higher education system that is in conformity with EQF and pro EU orientations. However, the situation is not at the level possible due to delays in implementation and due to a series of problems related to the transition process. Undoubtedly, the implementation of the NQF, which was envisaged in the educational strategic policies, is now considered a legal obligation for all responsible institutions and bearers of higher education, who are becoming conscious that this particular framework is essential to success and progress in this area.

Increased awareness on the implementation of the NQF shall warrant the quality of higher education and human capital development in universities in terms of teaching and research, continuous adaptation of academic curricula to the social and economic development requirements of the country and to needs of the labor market through the involvement of other stakeholders in the development, evaluation and improvement process of academic curricula, including the career offices for Departments, use of information and communication technologies to improve teaching methodology, facilitating the relationship between lecturers and students, building an electronic platform of research and knowledge accumulated at the university, continued and as required structuring of a national qualifications staff, defining benchmarks to evaluate universities based on performance, developing internal quality assurance procedures, student centered teaching methodologies improving the ration of academic staff and the number of students which are directly determines qualifications.

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