

## A POSSIBLE ENTRY LEVEL FOR SERBIA ?

1. The NQF 'proposal' envisaged 4 levels for a Serbian NQF below University level. These corresponded roughly to the current pattern of 3 and 4 year schools and the viša škola. The lowest level corresponded roughly to the previous 2 year school, which no longer exists as a pathway, but which is a qualification which many Serbs hold.
2. These 4 levels should correspond with levels II-IV of the EQF (as presented to the EU Parliament in September 2006<sup>\*</sup>).
3. The EQF has a level I. There is no requirement, or expectation, in the EQF that all Member States will have qualifications at each of its levels; practices can be expected to vary between countries. The question is whether it would be useful for there to be such a level of formal in Serbia, below even the previous 2 year Diploma. This note considers the advantages and disadvantages of establishing an 'Entry' level in Serbia<sup>†</sup>.

### ***Practices in some other EU countries***

4. In the UK there are few specifically vocational qualifications at this level. Though there are some training programmes below NVQ level 1 (NVQ 1 is probably equivalent to EQF 2, or Serbian 2 year school), these are either for slow or badly disadvantaged students offered to reward 'small steps' and with the clear purpose of leading to a more established qualification, or short 'trial' programmes for adults for which relatively informal papers are issued, though some are nationally recognized. They do not claim to provide meaningful credentials in the labour market.
5. The main use of this level in the UK is for certificates for basic skills of literacy, numeracy and IT for adults, as part of a major drive to attack a historic problem of large numbers in the workforce without such skills. These programmes are not usually directed to any particular occupations.
6. In the Netherlands the *VMBO* is a fairly broad vocational programme in lower secondary school which acts as a preparation for the more specifically vocational *BBO* and *BBL* (apprenticeship) routes. It may, however, class as EQF II, rather than I. In any case it has little or no credibility in the labour market unless further training is undertaken.
7. In France rather similarly there are the *Classes de troisième insertion* designed to ease the transition for less able young people into vocational routes at an earlier than normal age. I don't think, though, that they receive formal certification.
8. In Romania the lowest level is their Level One, which is probably very similar to the old Serbian 2 year diplomas. They aim now for most to go on to their Level Two (equivalent to Serbian 3 year school), though it is not yet clear how many will do this. I am not aware that there are any formal qualifications below this level, though there is a small group of 'second chance' certificates for some basic trades designed specifically for people who have dropped out of education at an early age. These are probably closer to Entry/EQF1 levels, though in Romania they are formally classified as Level One, along with the 2 year school.

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<sup>\*</sup> COM(2006) 479 final.

<sup>†</sup> In fact if it were decided to establish a lower level than those presented in the 'Proposal' it would make much sense to classify this lower level as Level I, and to re-number the higher levels II-V. This would place the numbering on the same basis as the EQF, and indeed roughly accord with the current Serbian nomenclature.

9. In all the western European countries there are a wide range of short vocational courses for unemployed people, some of which will be at a very basic level. I don't think that many of them give rise to formal certification, except to an extent, in the UK.

### ***Advantages in Serbia***

- According to the 2002 Census, some 21 per cent of the population has not completed elementary education.\* Though many of these will be older people having finished or towards the end of their working lives, it is plain that considerable numbers will be in the labour force and might benefit from some training. Indeed 33 per cent of the unemployed are classified as unskilled (Yearbook, Table 3.11).
- Such people would undoubtedly benefit from basic training programmes, particularly if they included basic skills of literacy and numeracy. It could be argued that formal certification would add to their incentives to enter training, and increase their chances of employment after they had completed it.

### ***Disadvantages in Serbia***

- Though there is a *nomenclature* level (I) representing this kind of level of educational attainment, it has never in the recent past, been the target of formal training. The introduction of formal certificates at this level might not be well understood;
- International studies seem to indicate that those who gain certificates at this level do not actually obtain labour market returns in terms of increased wages or a greater likelihood of employment. The exception is training in basic skills (literacy and numeracy);
- Looking more closely at the structure of the unemployed it appears that only 4 per cent have not completed primary education. A much higher proportion (19 per cent) have completed primary education but not gained any qualification in secondary education (Yearbook, Table 3.14). These people, who have completed primary education, should be able to attempt a shortened, more specific version of the previous 2 year diploma, particularly if they have some working experience, which most will. Offering a lower level certificate will not help them advance further than they currently are;
- If there was a very low level of qualification, designed specifically for adults, there might be a tendency to place all adult short courses in this category – just because there is such an association in Serbia between length of training and level of qualification. That would not help anyone.

### ***Conclusion***

10. I conclude that there is little case for formal certification at 'Entry' level in Serbia. There is no case at all for it in the case of young people who are now rightly encouraged to take a 3 year diploma. If introduced for adults it would be an alien concept, with few parallels in Europe and – on all the evidence – unlikely to gain practical recognition on the labour market, which is what matters.

11. This is not to say that there is not a good case for undertaking basic training of the unemployed and others in the population who have not completed an elementary education. That training, though, should focus on basic skills (literacy and numeracy); while it may be quite sensible to train people at this level for basic jobs with known employers, any attempt at claiming a genuine vocational aptitude at this level is unlikely to be believed.

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\* Statistical Yearbook, 2005, Table 2.9. Population aged 15 and over.

12. Most of the working population<sup>\*</sup>, and the unemployed, are likely to have both the skills and the experience to attempt a qualification at least at Level 1 in the proposal for an NQF (specific vocational skills equivalent to those gained by young people after a 2 year diploma).

13. If, however, it were decided to introduce an 'Entry' level a possible descriptor (drawing on EQF 1, and following the pattern of the other descriptors in the 'Proposal') might be:

"Recognizes basic general knowledge applied to a specific occupational field with skills required to carry out simple tasks. Direct supervision is required to ensure reliability. Pathways to future learning are defined within the occupation."

**JOHN WEST**

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<sup>\*</sup> In fact rather a rather greater proportion of employees have not completed primary education than is the case with the unemployed – around 18 per cent according the Yearbook (Table 3.8). Those who are employed are clearly demonstrating some level of working competence already. Even though they may be poorly placed if they lose their jobs, they are unlikely to be well served by an 'Entry' level certificate which could do no more than to confirm their current level of skill.