

## A NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY ?

### **Introduction**

1. This paper explores the structure, role and reporting arrangements of a Serbian qualifications authority. It is written on the assumption that a separate body is decided upon. The alternative, as explained in Paper NQF(3)2 is to have direct legislation which gives separate responsibilities to the Ministries of Education and of Labour, requiring them to conform to certain standards in awarding qualifications.
2. As has been already explained, compatibility with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) will require a minimum of:
  - a) the establishment of recognized *levels* which are capable of being related to those in the EQF<sup>\*</sup>;
  - b) a reasonable system of quality assurance.
3. At a minimum therefore, any Serbian Qualifications Authority (SQA) must oversee, and have some control over, these aspects. Beyond this, though, an SQA can have wider functions with respect to VET. The first part of this paper explores three models for an SQA:
  - Option 1 – a small body which performs only these minimum functions;
  - Option 2 – a body which also has the function of direct *validation of standards*, and organization of qualifications in a *sectoral framework*, as well as by level;
  - Option 3 – a body which, in addition to (2), plays a direct role in determining and quality assuring *methods of assessment* and/or *accreditation of institutions* which may award qualification certificates.
4. The second part of the paper explores the implications for the constitution and reporting of an SQA which may differ depending on which option is selected. It also explores the implications for some existing national bodies.

### **Options**

#### **Option 1**

5. Under this option an SQA would publish a series of descriptions of levels to which recognized Serbian qualifications could be allocated, and would determine, for each qualification, which level it was ascribed to. It would have the power, from time to time, to change the descriptions of the levels, though this would not be expected to be frequent.
6. As well as determining the level of a qualification the SQA would need to satisfy itself that the qualification in question was properly awarded. For the most part it would do this by relying on the established quality assurance mechanisms (e.g. detailed curriculum profiles) of the school system, and through the quality requirements of the Ministry of Labour/NES when commissioning courses for unemployed people. It might, though, set certain requirements for qualifications not supported by either Ministry (e.g. qualifications devised by enterprises, private providers not contracted to the Ministry of Labour, workers 'universities' etc.) and it would need to have a power of accreditation and of inspection in relation to these.

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<sup>\*</sup> This does not mean that Serbia needs necessarily to have each of the 8 levels of the draft EQF, or that each Serbian level needs to equate exactly to one in the EQF. In any case, of course, the EQF levels are currently in draft, and may be modified as a result of consultation within the EU.

7. Under this option, the SQA would not attempt to specify any organization in terms of recognized sectors, or to specify the detailed standards of qualifications (e.g. that those labelled relevant to a certain sector actually accorded with the expectations of that sector). If a sector, through voluntary social partnership, wished to accredit certain qualifications as meeting the needs of that sector the SQA might promote that fact in its publications of qualifications, for example by conferring a special title.

8. An SQA of this type would be a small, relatively technical agency. It would largely work through the existing structures of the Ministries of Education and Labour. Though it would have no powers to change practice in schools and training providers, it could – at the extreme – disallow a qualification from continuing in the national framework. More usually it would approach the Ministry with its concerns and ask for an investigation or remedial action to be taken. It might have the ability to publish a report if it considered that practice was inconsistent with its minimum quality assurance requirements. Such published reports could have the effect of stimulating corrective action by the ministry or training provider concerned.

9. An SQA of this type would best be governed by a small Board made up of national employers and trades union organizations, perhaps also with someone from the University sector.

## **Option 2**

10. A stronger SQA would have responsibility for elaborating a sectoral structure to VET qualifications, as well as levels, and for ensuring that the standards of knowledge skill and competence of those attaining qualifications in a particular sector were adequate for that sector.

11. This could be most simply done by dividing the vocational sphere into sectors (if one followed international practice this would probably require a minimum of around 20 sectoral groupings), and convening panels of employers and unions to give approval for qualifications presented to the SQA for accreditation.

12. While this validation would give some assurance that qualifications designated as being in the national framework are recognized by representatives of industry, it is not a very efficient way to proceed. The reason is that development of a qualification takes place *before* the act of validation – clearly if a qualification is developed but then fails to be validated then much effort is wasted. It is better, therefore, if the SQA, and the sector panels used for validation, indicate beforehand what procedures are the right ones to follow in constructing curricula and assessments. On this model, the sectoral panels would in fact become permanent structures. The methods used by the panels for establishing standards might differ – for example they could derive from a formal exercise to establish occupational standards, or they might arise from discussion, consultation or international comparisons. We could expect standards to be elaborated in more detail in some sectors than others.

13. Under this model, the SQA would have the role of deciding the sectoral structure of the NQF and of bringing together suitable panels, or more permanent committees, of employers and trade unions. It would have the power to amend the sectoral structure from time to time.

14. This type of SQA would not have the role of developing curricula itself. That would be done in the school and adult training systems, according to their own conventions (for example schools would include an amount of general education, which would tend not to be included for adult courses). It would not directly develop assessment instruments or examinations, which again would be devised in the school and adult training systems, but sectoral panels might make requirements about the *types* of assessment that they regarded as credible (for example, examinations, assessments of work practice *etc.*)

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\* These panels or committees could be wider – for example involving senior teachers, representatives of subject associations and people from universities.

15. As in Option 1, quality assurance would be the responsibility of the organizations concerned (Ministries of Labour and Education), though there would need for the SQA to devise arrangements for organizations not falling within the responsibilities of the national regulations of these ministries.

16. An SQA under Option 2 would need to be larger than that in Option 1. Though the structure of its Board might be the same, it would need a secretariat capable of convening and organizing the agendas of the sectoral panels in an organized manner. We could expect that the organization of the panels would be a gradual matter, with more sectors added to the system each year until the full system was operational. Interim arrangements would be needed in cases where panels had yet to be formed.

### **Option 3**

17. Under this option an SQA would take full responsibility for quality assurance of qualifications, ensuring that certificates were only issued to individuals where it was satisfied that they had fulfilled the requirements of an award.

18. As in Option 2, it would establish and validate standards, advised by sector panels. In addition, though, it would directly accredit schools and training providers who could offer qualifications. In doing this, it would set requirements (for example, trained staff, requisite equipment, forms of self-assessment), and be capable of inspecting, from time to time, whether these requirements continued to be observed.

19. It might also prescribe the form of examinations or other assessments that were to be used. At one extreme it could set examination papers and hold a bank of standardized practical tests. A less centralized system might be for it to set guidelines for assessment by schools and training providers, coupled with a sample inspection ('moderation' or 'verification') of the practices of schools and training providers.

20. Under this system the certificates awarded would in practice be guaranteed by the SQA, so it would need to keep a register of those who had received certificates (so it could replace those that were lost) and to develop a procedure for dealing with appeals by students who considered that they had been unfairly treated.

21. This body would need a large staff, not only to act as a secretariat to the panels, but also for administration of the certificate system, inspection of providers for accreditation and verification of the procedures used by schools and training providers for assessment of students.

### **Constitution, Reporting and Relation with other Bodies**

22. It is envisaged that under any of these options the SQA would be established by law, and would be governed by an appointed board. Questions arise, though, about who should appoint the Board and where the resources for the SQA come from.

23. It would be simplest if a single Minister appointed the SQA board. The law establishing an SQA could specify a number of board members to represent employers, unions, educational experts *etc.* and/or specify that the Minister should consult with particular organizations before making appointments. For example it could require that the Minister of Education should consult with the Minister for Labour before making appointments (or *vice versa*). It might be possible for two Ministers each to make a number of appointments, though only one could appoint the Chairperson.

24. The workload of an SQA would vary each year, so a law establishing it would best specify that its funds came from a Ministry, rather than being voted direct by Parliament. It might be possible for it to draw funds from two Ministries (to reflect, for example, its work in connection with schools, as opposed to adult training), but this could be awkward.

25. It would probably be helpful, under options 2 or 3, for it to be possible for the SQA to be given specific tasks by ministers from time to time, over and above its regular activities. For example, Ministers might want it to represent Serbia at certain international meetings, or to conduct special exercises connected with qualifications. A small SQA under option 1 would be unlikely to have the capacity to undertake much specially commissioned work, though it could supervise contracts for such work.

### ***Relations with other bodies***

26. A small SQA (Option 1) would not have overlapping functions with other bodies. Under this option the SQA would rely on the existing machinery within the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour for developing curricula, assessments and for recognizing providers (though, as we have seen, it would have the power to recognize further providers not accredited by these Ministries).

27. An SQA as described in Option 2 would also not seem to overlap with existing functions in Serbia. It would, though, contribute standards or express certain procedures that would need to be adopted by those developing vocational curricula in the Institute for Educational Development. In the case of the school 'pilot' curricula, work has been done to establish standards recognized by industry. In the longer term this work would become the responsibility of an SQA under Option 2, as industry panels were established.

28. Under Option 3 an SQA would take on a number of functions currently performed in the Institute for Educational Development, most importantly the role of governing assessment. It would have parallels with the Institute for Evaluation which oversees assessment and certification for general education.

29. It would not seem wise to locate an SQA within the Institute for Educational Development since there might be a conflict of interest in developing curricula on the one hand and approving their standards on the other. This is not perhaps an insuperable issue, but at the very least an SQA should have some separate governance. One option might be to make an SQA (particularly perhaps the smaller one, under Option 1) a sub-committee of the National Educational Council, though it is hard to judge the merits of this since the Council has yet to meet and set a pattern for its activities. Certainly there would need to be a strong, if not exclusive, VET emphasis on the SQA.

30. Under Option 3, an SQA would perform the function of accrediting organizations used by the National Employment Service for providing courses for unemployed people.\* This might relieve the NES of the need to conduct detailed evaluations and assessments of providers itself, though they would need to establish that they were receiving value for money and that their funds were correctly used, since these would not be functions of the SQA.

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\* at least those providers who offered certificates for their courses; it would always be open for the NES to choose to purchase courses which did not lead to recognized certificates. Some short up-dating courses might be of this type.