

## A VOLUNTARY APPROACH?

### ***Introduction***

1. At the last meeting of the Working Group we were asked to elaborate further the idea of starting a Serbian NQF on a voluntary basis, with a gradual organic development. There was interest in this approach given the facts that:

- erecting an NQF in Serbia by law or by the establishment of a formal body to govern it was likely to be a lengthy process;
- in some other countries the evolution of an NQF has been gradual, and has started with voluntary agreements leading later to a more formal expression and organization.\*

2. This paper, therefore, illustrates how such a voluntary evolution might take place. Of course each country is different, and much depends on the nature of existing organizations and the traditions of co-operative working.

### ***An illustration***

3. Though it would be possible for development to take place entirely independent of government, it will undoubtedly be helpful to have some signal or invitation from government that the development of an NQF would be helpful. This might most usefully take the form of a joint statement by the Ministries of Education and Labour (perhaps also associated with the Ministry of the Economy?). Such a statement might simply say that they would welcome the evolution of a national qualifications framework, led through social partnership, to guide the development of vocational qualifications for young people and adults.

4. The social partners might then form a 'Joint Oversight Committee' whose first tasks would be to:

- determine the main levels (drawing no doubt on the work of this Working Group), ensuring that the descriptors allowed the inclusion of both adult and youth training;
- settle the sectoral structure of the framework;
- publicize their proposals amongst employers and trades unions, and more generally.

5. Following that, and the resulting public discussion, the Joint Oversight Committee might arrange for a first group of sector committees to be formed. It would be sensible to start gradually, with perhaps up to six committees at first, selected for sectors where there were already established employer and union structures, and where there was interest in training issues.

6. Such committees might initially focus on the issue of certification for adults, making recommendations for standards and conditions of recognition of training<sup>†</sup> which would be likely to be respected in their sectors. Officially, of course, it would be for the Ministries to decide whether to adopt such conditions for the training that they funded, but it might be expected that they would welcome guidance given by the industries which would eventually employ the students whose training they funded.

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\* In Denmark and Germany co-operation between employers and unions on the requirements for apprenticeship qualifications occurred well before any legal recognition of the system. More recently, in England, it was an initiative (in 1990) of employers' organizations to state equivalences between vocational and academic qualifications which resulted in a legal basis for a national qualifications framework seven years later. In a number of other countries the expression of an NQF is in effect the presentation by government of the system of recognized qualifications within their country, rather than a means of recognizing or controlling those qualifications.

<sup>†</sup> such as length of relevant work experience and/or level of general education.

7. Joint arrangements of this kind could develop further, for example:
- these committees could be formally recognized by the Ministries and provision made for formal consultation with them when profiles were revised;
  - the committees could run their own registration schemes for workers who had fulfilled their recommended requirements. In a number of countries formal qualifications have evolved from this kind of registration scheme, particularly in areas such as electrical installation where public safety is important or the provision of financial advice to members of the public;
  - the committees could run a recognition scheme for training providers, thus helping their industries know which training providers had satisfied a quality benchmark.

Such activities could have a commercial dimension, with the committee charging for certain services or recognition certificates. In England a number of the *Sector Skills Councils* (which are voluntary bodies, encouraged and assisted by government, but with no legal powers) publish commercial training packages and conduct research and development under government contracts.

8. Examples of all these kinds of activities can be found in EU countries and in the USA. It would be difficult to know whether they would develop in Serbia – one would have to let ‘nature take its course’.

## **Comments**

9. By its nature it is impossible to plan for such a voluntary evolution, apart perhaps for the early stages. Much depends on the willingness of people to participate, and particularly of leading individuals to drive the process. The degree of government support will be an important dimension – clearly development would be faster if some financial support, for example towards the cost of a secretariat, were given. But this kind of development, if supported by social partners, might well be attractive to donors,

10. This kind of approach has definite strengths in terms of real social partnership and ensuring that the evolution of an NQF does not run faster than the capacity of the system to handle it. However it will have weaknesses in terms of quality assurance. A body, or series of bodies, without a legal basis can only really comment and advise. Those are important functions, but this voluntary system could obviously not be held accountable for quality in the education and training system. It is from this direction that pressure is likely to arise in the future to convert a voluntary system into one with a more formal legal basis, as has happened in a number of other countries.