

Expert group institutionalization and task expansion in European education policy-making

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Abstract:

The role of expertise has been considered as an important feature in EU governance processes, not least in the context of soft governance and policy coordination. This article focuses on how an advisory group can over a short period of time acquire high degree of stability and legitimacy in a sector where joint action falls under the subsidiarity principle and joint policy coordination on European level has traditionally been difficult. With the introduction of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in 2008, an expert group (EQFAG) was created to support the national processes. From being established as a temporary expert group it became an informal advisory group in the area of lifelong learning, bridging the European and national levels in terms of debates for future action.

Introduction

In this article the role of expertise in EU policy processes (Radaelli, 1999) is discussed with a special focus on the dynamics of one specific Commission advisory group. The aim is to shed light on how over a short period of time such groups can acquire legitimacy and stability, in a context where their formal regulative capacities are limited and joint policy coordination on European level traditionally has been difficult. With the exception of vocational education and some professional degrees, EUs capacity to engage in educational policy has been constrained. The EU has actively worked towards expanding its authority into areas where it traditionally has either lacked or had limited competencies, a process that has been referred to as the ‘creeping competence’ of the EU (Pollack, 1994). The introduction of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a mode for policy-making in Europe emphasized policy coordination and soft law rather than supranational directives and regulation, creating space for policy-making where this has previously been met with resistance (Gornitzka, 2007). How this space is filled is to a large extent dependent on member state preferences and the role of the Commission (De Ruiter, 2010).

Among various initiatives, a policy instrument that has been developed in this new policy space is the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) introduced in 2008 with a joint Parliament and Council Recommendation as a means to develop more transparent educational qualifications systems across Europe. As a part of the process,

an advisory group was established (EQF Advisory Group - EQFAG) with its mandate outlined in the Recommendation to assure the coherence and promote transparency of the processes related to the EQF. However, despite its initially ambiguous and vague role, over a period of just a few years the group was able to exert considerable influence concerning decisions that are formally under the competence of the member states and it became widely considered as a semi-permanent structure by its members and the Commission. Examining the EQFAG as a case shows that even when national competence formally remains in place, such European level expert groups can become partially institutionalized, that is, they can acquire and increase stability (become (semi-)permanent), legitimacy (exert influence) and taken-for-granted (uncontested) characteristics. One can thus argue that this case represents a specific organizational form for transnational actor coordination, involving a wide range of actors on EU level – including both stakeholders, experts, member states and EU level actors.

Based on the above considerations the main question addressed in this article is: how did the EQFAG expert group become institutionalized, taking into account the constrained possibilities for European integration in the sector? The article will highlight how new institutional arrangements can be developed in constrained environments, exemplifying how a considerable increase of actual competence can be identified in a context where the formal competencies remain limited. Furthermore, the

analysis shows how new kinds of actor constellations emerge on European level, and how these could become important arenas for new policy initiatives in the long run.

The article will first focus on the nature and use of expert groups in the EU. The analytical framework will discuss how institutionalization takes place through increase in (a) stability, (b) legitimacy and (c) taken-for-grantedness, while the empirical discussion will examine these three main concepts by outlining the changing understanding of the groups' mandate, the development of procedures and consequently the changing nature of the group. The discussion will focus on the institutionalization process following the three core concepts (a, b, c), and concluding comments present the theoretical contribution as well as possible future implications of such new institutional configurations.

EU Expert Groups

The use of expertise and experts in EU policy processes is widespread and can take a variety of forms (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008; Metz, 2013). Expert groups are according to EU rules¹ (European Commission, 2010) defined as a '*consultative entity set up by the Commission or its services for the purpose of providing them with advice and expertise*'. According to these rules, expert groups have minimum six members who are appointed either in personal capacity, according to common interest,

¹ 21 horizontal rules for Commission expert groups outlined in C(2010) 7649.

representing organizations or member states. An expert group is also expected to meet on multiple occasions. They can be set up with a Commission decision (formal expert group), or by an individual Commission department (informal expert group). Expert groups can be used for preparation of new initiatives, delegated acts, or in the implementation of EU legislation and coordination with member states.

The use of expert groups is traditionally regarded as a ‘crucial property’ of the multi-level EU governance arrangements in conducting regulation by information (Majone, 1997). Emphasis on information has become even more pronounced after the more widespread use of OMC has emphasized the spread of standards and measurement as means for governing (Lawn 2011). In the White Paper of European Governance (European Commission, 2001), it is highlighted that the use of expertise is a means for “boosting confidence”, while it was noted that the operation of expert groups had been opaque and lacked public confidence. Furthermore, focus on experts and expertise as a source for legitimacy has led to accusations of the EU being a technocratic union with democratic deficit (Stie, 2012). In 2005, a new framework for the operation of expert groups was proposed, accompanied by a public register of expert groups (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). In 2010, the rules for the expert groups were further revised (European Commission, 2010), outlining the current operating principles.

The direct link to interest groups and stakeholders provides important policy expertise for the Commission (Christiansen, Føllesdal, & Piattoni, 2003). Recent research also suggests that expert groups are used as a means to build political support (Metz, 2013). In the context of the subsidiarity principle where the Commission cannot act without the member states, this becomes particularly important. At the same time, expert groups have an advisory role and the Commission is not obliged to take into account the opinions proposed.

Two studies by Gornitzka and Sverdrup (2008, 2010) show that even though the overall number of such expert groups has increased, there is substantial sectoral diversity in the groups' distribution and functions, and in the linkages of expert groups to various governance levels. These two studies have outlined some of the key characteristics of this diversity and emphasize that the more technical expertise is required for making decisions, the more likely one will find extensive use of expert groups. The DGs for Research and for Environment operate with most expert groups in terms of numbers, whereas traditional community areas such as Competition and Trade operate with few expert groups. Education is one of the policy areas where the use of expert groups is considered to be in the 'medium range' in terms of numbers. While expert groups do not have decision making capacity of their own, they can have substantial input to policy processes by providing advice, knowledge as well as information (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008).

According to the operating rules, membership should ensure ‘*a balanced representation of relevant areas of expertise and areas of interest*’ (European Commission, 2010).

There is some variety in how expertise is used and who can be considered to be an expert in European policy processes. The kind of input the experts can provide is also dependent on the mandate of the group and the stage of the policy process: groups that are established in the policy-formation stage are likely to provide different kinds of inputs than those that are involved in an executive process or act as general advisory groups in a particular policy area. However, a policy-maker from a national context can be considered as an expert in the capacity of being part of an expert group, the same applies for interest group and stakeholder representatives. For the purposes of this study, expert group membership is a primary criterion for defining someone as an expert in this context. This interpretation could give reason to assume that not all individual actors in the group have the same level of expertise regarding a particular topic. Uneven capacity opens up the space for particular individuals and policy actors in the group who possess more expertise to advance their particular preferences regarding an issue (Pollack, 2003, p. 7). This allows for independent Commission influence, due to their superior access to information in the policy coordination processes (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996, p. 355). This points towards the necessity to examine the internal dynamics of the group for understanding its capacity for action in this new transnational arena and the legitimacy of its decisions.

Process of Institutionalization

Institutions are defined here as ‘a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices’ (Olsen, 2007, p. 4). Rules can be enforced through direct coercion and authority, or by being seen as a part of what is considered appropriate behavior in the form of ‘*routines, procedures, conventions roles, strategies, organizational forms, and technologies*’ (March & Olsen 1989, p. 22). Rules, both formal and informal, set a framework for possible action (North, 1990), forming the basic fabric and structure for relations between actors as well as their behavior. Rules thus assure continuity and stability independent of possible turnover of actors (March & Olsen, 1989).

Furthermore, an institutionalized structure would imply that compliance is not assured by formal authority but instead guided by a logic of appropriateness, applicable in areas where decisions have to be made about diffuse values (Hooghe, 2007). Examples of these can be decisions related to the appropriate level of European coordination in an area such as education. In general, in order to be considered as legitimate, decisions should be considered desirable and appropriate (Suchman, 1995), both internally and externally. In the case of the EQFAG legitimacy of its decisions is particularly important, as the group does not have any formal power to assure compliance by the member states. In simplified form, one could argue that voluntary compliance with the EQFAG’s decisions implies that these are at least to some extent perceived as legitimate by the member states.

A process of institutionalization can be observed when initially ambiguous processes become specified and formalized procedures. In practice, the development of such procedures means that the activities first need to be discussed at a high level of detail, and then over time gain procedural aspects (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). By reproducing such procedures they become standardized, implying that a process of reproduction is created (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011). Thus, standardization is an important mechanism to create rules (Brunsson, Rasche, & Seidl, 2012). These rule systems represent the outcome of interaction and the relative power between members to negotiate preferences (North, 1990, p. 16). It is through interaction and activities of the participants, as well as repetition of procedures that rules become unquestioned and taken-for-granted (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). This is related to the role of language in the process of institutionalization – by developing a shared vocabulary, legitimacy is increased (Colyvas & Powell, 2006).

In addition to legitimacy, in order to be institutionalized there needs to be organizational capacities and resources to assure distinct organizational space (Gornitzka, 2007). For processes dependent on sufficient administrative capacity, availability of such resources is key in maintaining sufficient stability. Resources are not only monetary, for instance, attention can be seen as a particularly important but scarce resource (March & Olsen, 1989). The development of mechanisms to assure that an issue remains in the attention of relevant actors is an important means to assure continuity over time. Continuity is

important as the costs of exiting become larger over time, especially if results are produced (Eberlein, 2003, p. 167). In short, this would imply that unless there is a shift in the political attention that results in a period of upheaval/disruption, one can expect that over time there will be a drive towards preserving the process.

An institutionalization process is consequently operationalized as consisting of increased stability, legitimacy, and taken-for-granted rules and procedures of a particular structure, that are based on steady access to resources. This does not mean that all of these processes would increase at equal speeds. A group that has become institutionalized is characterized by the existence of rules and standardized procedures with a stable resource basis, as well as self-legitimized and taken-for-granted characteristics (Gornitzka, 2007). To operationalize these dimensions, the article will focus on how procedures have been developed within the EQFAG, and to what extent the group's activities as well as the rules framing the group's actions have become taken-for-granted and are perceived as legitimate. The rules that frame action include (a) the formal mandate for the EQFAG group and how it is understood by its members; (b) role division between the members and the Commission and how this shifts over time; (c) scope and nature of the group in terms of membership and tasks. Enactment of the group's main mandate to oversee the national processes is done through the referencing process and key focus is put on the development of procedures related to this process. Taken-for-grantedness within the group can be argued to exist if these

procedures and rules are not questioned by the members of the group. As the group does not have any regulative power, legitimacy can be argued to have increased if the group's decisions are complied with in cases where this goes against some member states' will, despite lacking any coercive capacity and the process being constrained by the subsidiarity principle. Access to resources is here examined in terms of both time and the actual physical capacity for the group to meet.

Notes on Methodology

The study underlying this article gathered empirical data through interviews and document analysis. The interview material consists of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the EQFAG (former and current) as well as experts who have worked with the EQF outside the EQFAG. The respondents include individuals from the Commission, its agencies, stakeholder representatives as well as national representatives. Data from 22 interviews with national level actors in three countries is used as a background regarding the external links to national level. The respondents were selected based on (a) their current or previous formal representative role in the group; (b) their close alignment with the EQF process. The latter selection included a very limited group of individuals who were identified through a process of snowballing as they were seen as the 'architects' of the EQF and have been frequently participating in the group meetings as well as in various activities related to the EQFAG group, for

instance, the peer learning activities. The interviews focused on the respondents' experience as an educational expert in EU processes; their understanding of the idea, content and purpose of the EQF as well as the process through which it was developed; and on cooperation patterns with other actors and sectors in the group and beyond. The analysis was conducted using concepts derived from the analytical framework, but in an iterative manner with sensitivity towards potential new patterns and categories. In addition to the interviews, a number of documents were used as documentation of the process. This includes the formal documents related to the introduction and development of the EQF as well as the available documentation on the EQFAG group's activities and the outputs of the referencing processes (the referencing reports by member states). Furthermore, meeting schedules and agendas were examined to the extent they were available.

The interviews for this study were conducted in March 2013, implying that the time period that is studied in this study covers around 6 years (2007-2013). The analytical framework focused on processes of institutionalization that forms the basis here is often used in the context of rather long time periods. For instance, Colyvas and Powell's study (2006) on the development of developing technology transfer offices in the USA covered a thirty-year period, which they argue to be necessary due to the subtlety of institutional transformation (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 277). Consequently, this case

provides an empirical test for the usefulness of the theoretical approach for more recent and short-term processes.

Institutionalizing the EQFAG

The EQF and the establishment of the EQFAG

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) was adopted in 2008 as a joint Parliament and Council recommendation (2008/C 111/01). The EQF is an eight level qualifications framework formulated in terms of learning outcomes with an aim to be: *‘a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe’*. The basic principle is that countries develop national qualifications frameworks (NQF) based on learning outcomes that are referenced to the EQF by comparing national levels with the European ones. The process of developing NQFs implies that countries have to express their educational systems in terms of learning outcomes and, amongst other things, pay more attention to issues of informal/non-formal learning in developing their NQFs. Therefore, one can argue that the introduction of a NQF can be a rather political and sensitive matter in countries where these ideas are new (Elken, 2016).

The purpose of the EQFAG in the recommendation (2008/C 111/01) was outlined as being *‘responsible for providing overall coherence and promoting transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework’*.

The EQFAG has been active since the end of 2007, and the composition of the group includes national administrations, candidate countries, third countries, associations, trade unions as well as international organizations². This was not the first expert group that was used in the process leading up to the adoption of the EQF, expert groups had been used during the policy formulation stage and were arguably an important means to create consensus regarding the instrument. According to the rules of expert groups in the EU, the group was established as informal and temporary.

The Changing Mandate of the EQFAG

Following the subsidiarity principle, decisions regarding introducing an NQF at the national level are falling under national competence, formulated by one of the EQFAG group members as:

‘I mean, these are national issues, they are on the basis of subsidiarity, it’s a recommendation, not a directive, and if you don’t like what you see in France, then hard luck’.

Acknowledgment that the national level was still having primary decision-making power raised questions of legitimacy of the group and its actual role, especially when certain more ‘difficult cases’ emerged:

² Includes: EU countries + Norway, Iceland, Croatia and Turkey + Eurochambers, Business Europe, Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public services (CEEP), Council of Europe, European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME), European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL), European Students’ Union (ESU), European Trade Union Congress (ETUC), European University Association (EUA), Public Employment Services (PES).

We did not have the power to approve or disapprove, (...) but yet we saw things that didn't seem to correspond to the spirit of the EQF. But here we were saying – thanks very much and we go on to the next one. (...) Obviously [we cannot] say to country X or country Y that we do not approve this, because the [EQFAG] simply cannot do this.

Despite its lack of formal power to approve or disapprove, the EQFAG group has on occasion informally refused certain member states' decisions. A specific decision moment included one member state who expressed a will to reference parts of its high school leaving criteria to level 5 on the EQF. This would have meant that this country would have referenced their high school diplomas one level higher than the rest of Europe, equal to what in the rest of Europe is considered short cycle higher education. While the group has no formal capacity to reject such a decision, the group was clearly opposed to this, even as this in fact went against the logic of EQF (that one would find the best fit between the level descriptions):

From the logic of EQF it should be like that. The only problem is that.. you have the defined level for bachelor – for university entry, then the logical conclusion is that you need a standard school leaving certificate. But that is contradictory to the whole set-up of the EQF based on learning outcome. If the X general schooling system is so much better, they should say 'sorry' this is how it is. But this is close to impossible.

There is an implicit expectation that levels 6-8 are for higher education (bachelor-master-PhD). The formal argument for the mentioned refusal was that the equivalence of learning outcomes was not sufficiently documented by that member state. However, a number of the EQFAG members highlighted in the interviews that there had also been

an underlying reason related to the potential adverse consequence of the decision. This specific occurrence is referred to as one of the instances where the group showed its power vis-à-vis a preference by the member state, and arguably, the group in this instance ‘won’. This has led to the situation where the common informal (and political) agreement is that a high school leaving certificate is on level 4 in all countries, in essence potentially undermining the idea of qualifications frameworks as being about finding a more technical match in terms of learning outcome descriptions.

This suggests that while the mandate was rather loosely defined to start with, the understanding of the group’s role changed substantially over time, becoming stronger and having the capacity to exert informal pressure in an area where legal competencies are limited. This can be seen as an indication that the external legitimacy of the group’s decisions in this area, provided that the countries adhere (or appear to adhere, which can also be seen as a signal that this is considered relevant). Furthermore, commitment to participate and engage can be seen that the group is perceived as relevant. Furthermore, the changing mandate has led to the development of a set of procedures related to the referencing process.

Development of Procedures

The group started with few guidelines in terms of practices and procedures – its purpose was to provide coherence and transparency, but it was not clear how this was to take

place. This initial uncertainty led to an incremental learning process and gradual development of practices and procedures:

... no one was really sure what the group was supposed to do, and what role it could play and how it could comment really on the qualifications frameworks that had been set up by the other countries. So.. then bit by bit we started to be a bit more confident in what we were doing within the group. Then we set up criteria for judging national qualifications frameworks and then we started to havesome form of an evaluation of the national reports as they arrived at the [EQFAG]. And there was a set of criteria for judging the appropriateness of these different national qualifications frameworks.

The development of such criteria took place after the first ‘difficult cases’ emerged, an example of which was presented in the previous section. These procedures were largely furthered by the Commission. One of such procedures was a ten-point set of criteria³ how the referencing process between NQF and EQF should look like. These criteria included various elements, for example requirements about who should be involved in the referencing process (i.e. inclusion of stakeholders), how linkages between the NQF and EQF should be assured, transparency of the process, quality assurance, involvement of international experts, and use of the qualifications framework after the process on diplomas and qualifications certificates. Overall, the aim that was outlined in the document is that these ten criteria should assure for a process that is ‘*validated by competent authorities, is relevant, is transparent, can be compared and generates trust.*’

The ten criteria form the basis for the referencing process at the national level, the

³ ‘Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF’, issued by DG EAC and CEDEFOP

output of which is a referencing report that is presented to the EQFAG group. One actor described the initial process as rather unstructured but emphasized that over time, the approach has become more structured where both CEDEFOP and the Council of Europe provide feedback. The interviewees highlighted that the authority of the group is increasingly respected: *‘It has gradually turned into a real discussion and countries are told if the reports are not up to criteria. The request is informal but countries would oblige to this’*. This indicates that there is an implicit obligation to adhere to the views of the group, even when this is neither related to a specific formal regulative capacity nor the original mandate of just assuring transparency and coherence of the process.

The group activities and the process of referencing with the specified ten criteria became rather standardized. One could argue that this process of standardization is to an extent necessary to assure comparability between the various national referencing processes and for the members to retain trust in the process. Not only did the process of referencing become more standardized, the actual format of the referencing reports that are produced in the process became increasingly similar, as there was initially some uncertainty about what kind of information they should contain. After the first few rounds there was a learning process, and over time most referencing reports followed a rather similar procedure, structure and outline. There was one respondent who raised the fragility of such a process, but the other members did not appear to question the content of the referencing reports. The fact that the very first reports did not follow the same

template was raised as an issue in the interviews, and indications were made that perhaps some of the very first countries should soon go for ‘round two’ of the referencing process to assure that their processes follow the now developed criteria. This suggests that the format became taken-for-granted and internalized in the group. While the formal procedure became standardized, a national representative also highlighted how in a number of cases exceptions have been made regarding the ten criteria, as statements of *intent* to follow the criteria are sometimes termed equivalent with actually having followed the criteria.

The referencing procedure was specified to include a division of tasks, giving the Commission a rather central role: *‘The Commission coordinates this process, they chair the [EQFAG]. The Commission has a formal responsibility, the functioning of the system depends on the member states and they have become increasingly important’*.

The chairing of the meetings changed, after being based for a period on three member states’ chairing (former, current and incoming presidency of EU), the Commission took over the chairing the meetings, leading to criticisms from some of the member states and stakeholders. This suggests that the division of tasks was not quite settled yet and there was considerable divergence in terms of the appropriate role for the Commission. While the EU related actors seemed to emphasize how member states are in the driving seat (understandable considering the subsidiarity principle), others seemed to be more uncertain with calls for both more and less Commission involvement. While some saw

the Commission as imposing (too much) authority, others were calling for *more* strategic management. This implies that while there is a procedural agreement, the principal discussion on the appropriate role of the Commission in the group was still a process.

Even if the respondents emphasize ambiguity in terms of the nature and strength of the Commission's role, this is a stark change from a decade or two ago where this level of EU involvement in education would have been a very controversial idea. As such, the role the Commission has acquired in the process, is already rather significant and noted by European level actors:

When we are involved in the European process education and training we can see that the role of EC is more and more important, and what I was saying before about the role of EQF being just a tool, it still has an important effect on national policies in education on the organization of systems. (...) I think the role of the Commission is more and more important. Now we have the debate with the new perspective regarding 2020, to link education and training more to employment and to develop knowledge economy. This is a real revolution.

As the EQF as an instrument is related to various educational sectors and aims to bring together education and employment as policy sectors, a common understanding of the main terminology is dependent on actors across various educational and policy sectors agreeing on the definitions. By agreeing on common language and standards this forms a basis for shared norms that in turn can assure continuity in cases of turnover of participants. While one might presume education as a homogenous and integrated sector, this is not the case even at the national level, outlined by one respondent as:

‘One issue at the national level can be that responsibility for different parts of the framework is located in different parts of the ministry, and we had the situation at the first meeting that people from the same country did not actually know each other’.

Some of the sectorial tensions in the EQF have remained, in particular due to questions about sectorial ownership of the framework (Elken, 2015).

Linked to these tensions, the development of a common language and standards has been a core concern in the group activities with respect to assisting with the implementation of the EQF. In the beginning of the process, the focus was primarily on the translation between German, French and English languages. However, debates on the terminology across educational sectors emerged. While the process early on was characterized by individual member state conceptions of terminology, one could in the interviews identify an emerging common understanding. There have been previous attempts to develop glossaries of terms⁴, but they were described by one actor as just *‘words on paper’*, where this group created actual debates on content through face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, there are still actors who would advocate a different understanding, one instance being the concept *‘qualification’* that is quite essential in the process. In one of the interviews a national actor referred to an ongoing debate on what an *‘informal qualification’* would mean. At the same time, the debates between

⁴ For instance by Council of Europe and CEDEFOP

member states have reached a more technical stage as the initial more ideological debates have diminished over time.

There seems to be an increasingly shared notion with respect to the underlying issues related to the national processes of developing qualifications frameworks, and a number of the interviewees brought up similar issues as being relevant for the process. One instance of this is trust as a means to assure the functioning of qualifications frameworks. The whole process is dependent on trust, exemplified by one actor as: *'The referencing of all these NQFs to the EQF – it is claimed to be LO based, but I am not able to see what kind of analysis has actually been done. They claim it, and they claim it and I have to trust it.'* While the actor later highlighted this as a potential fragility in the process, there seems to be acceptance of this trust between national level actors in the group, and a shared notion that without this underlying trust the process could not function. There seems to be consciousness from the side of the Commission to build this trust, exemplified, for instance, by the fact that the comments given to the countries are not made public and public access to the meetings was kept rather closed.

The Changing Nature of the Group

The EQFAG group membership initially followed a general agreement on, for instance, which organizations are considered as social partners in the EU, and which have a 'representative function' or 'umbrella organization' status. However, some stakeholders gained entrance through lobbying: *'We actually had to lobby quite intensively to be*

there every time, (...) we invited ourselves and no one really said no, you cannot come'.

This suggests that despite the existence of certain formal rules for participation, these can sometimes be interpreted flexibly. The limited set of stakeholders involved has led to concerns about stakeholder representation beyond the labour market. However, according to one respondent, there was consciousness from the side of the Commission to keep the group under member state control.

The dynamics changed as trade unions were included around 2009, and a number of the organizations that now are members do not participate in practice. The Public Employment Services (PES) was added to assure complementarity with the European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations framework (ESCO) that is coordinated by DG Employment. However, with the adding of responsibility for the Recommendation on Validation of informal and non-formal learning (2012/C 398/01), the group has become larger and includes new members from national delegations. As this expands the scope of action, this can bring in new organizational resources.

However, the need for new procedures and a sub-structure could be seen as a consequence. Alternatively, if the developed organizational template has been sufficiently internalized, one can also expect that such new tasks would be absorbed.

The way in which the group tackles such new tasks would essentially be an empirical question, beyond the empirical material in this article.

This strong involvement from the Commission can create an unbalanced division of tasks. This has to do with the fact that for some countries, there can be considerable turnover in whom they send as representatives to these meetings. At the same time, relevant individual actors from the Commission and CEDEFOP have considerable experience and expertise with the topic, creating a possible imbalance in the scope of possible input into the debates. One can also identify a diverging nature of the experts in the group – member state representatives who in many cases come from the respective ministry, representatives of stakeholder organizations and Commission representatives. However, the overall number of individuals who have been more closely involved is quite limited, leading to the establishment of what can be called ‘an inner group’. This inner group has not only been working with the EQF since the beginning, these members have also been the entrepreneurs in the overall process from its very origins. Arguably, these individuals have an important role in increasing the legitimacy of the group and of the EQF, as they can provide the necessary expertise and function as a common denominator amongst heterogeneous interests and interpretations. In this manner, they can also assure continuity and stability during turnover. Furthermore, the development of a common language is likely facilitated by them due to their long-standing expertise with the topic. At the same time, one could expect that as the procedural aspect of the group becomes more established, the group also would not be as dependent on single individuals.

The nature of the process at national levels means that the actual activities of the group were not evenly distributed across meetings that are scheduled in advance and have the same scope in terms of time allocated. In terms of resources this suggests that the meetings had regularity, and the resources allocated for the continuity of the group could thus be seen as rather stable. Assuring attention to the national process was, amongst other things, done by emphasizing urgency in the very early phases of the EQF process. It has been recognized that the initial deadlines for establishing NQFs were completely unrealistic, purposefully, as one of the key actors argued: *‘if you had said in 2008 that you would have until 2020 to do this, you would have lost momentum’*. Creating a sense of urgency was a means to assure that the issue retained attention from relevant actors. Analyzing in detail the political will related to the implementation processes at the *national* level is beyond the scope of this article, but the processes at the national level are commonly dependent on individual actors with sufficient expertise (often related to the expert group in some capacity) and local political will, as highlighted in the interviews. In that sense, assuring the steady flow of referencing reports is difficult as national processes are also dependent on other factors, and can speed up and slow down due to other national processes. At the same time, regular meetings provided a backbone for the process and assured continuity. This gave the Commission an opportunity to discuss potential new policy developments: *‘if there are less and less [reports] then what are you talking about the rest of the time? If you have*

a session with one referencing report, and it takes 1,5 hours, then what are you doing the rest of the one and a quarter of a day?'. The group can in this way function an arena for the Commission to discuss new policy ideas, something that was brought up in the interviews.

Discussion

In this article, an institutionalization process is operationalized as increased organizational stability, legitimacy, and taken-for-granted rules and procedures, which would entail that the group became something beyond its initial set-up. EQFAG activities became more standardized and increasingly followed procedures that became taken-for-granted. The development of routines was a rather rapid process, considering the time available and the heterogeneity of the members, both in terms of different national and sectoral perspectives. Standardization is a form for organizing and becomes a 'powerful tool for challenging and altering institutionalized behavior and identities' (Brunsson et al., 2012, p. 620). Consequently, the ten point criteria developed at the European level could be expected to have an impact on national processes. A competing argument can be that over time, these European debates can also become increasingly loosely coupled from the national level and that compliance would become symbolic. However, debates in some countries, e.g. Norway, suggest that the content of these criteria have had an effect on national policy debates. The existence of this rather

established set of criteria would suggest sustainability and stability in handling turnover of individual actors. The group was even described by one Commission representative as an '*informal advisory group on lifelong learning issues*' as a whole. Nurturing this seemed a conscious choice by adding tasks to the group, as it obtained the task of supporting the implementation of the new Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and as the EQF implementation process became a process that needs continuous monitoring rather than a single introduction of NQFs.. These new tasks can become a double-edged sword in the context of limited competencies and joint cooperation - new tasks mean new actors with potentially diverging values. In turn, this can necessitate a new process of consolidation of norms and values within the group. Despite the relevance of the EQF to validation of informal and non-formal learning, this can therefore dilute the focus of the group. While this could increase the permanence of the group and secure its continued existence as a new governance arena, this could also be a potential threat due to increased fragmentation. Alternatively, it could also happen that the EQF as an instrument will not be successful, where this could lead to a decoupling of the arena from the instrument, if this should take place.

As expert groups are used for building political support and consensus (Metz, 2013), one could argue that the use expert groups can become legitimacy enhancing tools. At the same time, in a sector like education where joint action has earlier been challenged

(Gornitzka, 2007), one can also expect that the group would not by default be perceived as legitimate. The legitimacy of the group is therefore naturally linked to the perceived legitimacy of the EQF as an instrument. However, the examples provided in this article also show that EQFAG has managed to exert informal pressure. This suggests that despite a lack of formal sanctioning, this arena acquired informal power and could be conceptualized as a form of informal governance on EU level. This indicates that it is possible to create joint coordination arenas that can function under limited formal competencies.

The Commission has elsewhere been identified as a clever entrepreneur, and has been able to advance its policy preferences due to superior expertise (Peters, 2006). At the same time, in this case it is evident that the member states saw value added in such a group as they continued to invest time and resources to comply with the procedures. By bringing member states into one room and having a cross-sectoral nature, the EQFAG created an arena for debates that previously did not exist. Furthermore, while expertise alone cannot explain its legitimacy, the seemingly neutral nature of the decisions that were made against set standards and procedures emphasizes these processes as technical, decoupled from more ideological or political discussions (Lawn 2011). Thus, the perceived neutrality in itself can facilitate legitimacy of the group.

An important condition that facilitates this development is the existence of a highly integrated core which has been able to facilitate the development of standardized

procedures. Here, individual experts who were driving the process forward in its early stages were essential. When procedures become taken-for-granted, this contributes to institutionalization (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). It is this “inner group” of actors in this integrated core who are able to assure continuity and stability despite turnover in the periphery of the group. As such, the article points towards the role of individual actors in a process of institutionalization and the importance of interaction. However, in the interaction process contestations still emerge. For example, despite increasing agreement on terminology, a number of the debates were still ongoing, suggesting that agreement on procedures and terminology is not a neatly linear process.

Externally, the primary enabling condition for keeping the process alive was the relative match between the overall stated objectives of the EQF and national policy domain. Focus on qualifications and lifelong learning is an area that has since Lisbon gained more political will for action. The EQF provided something that the member states appeared to agree with, even if their starting points were rather heterogeneous and nationally sensitive. It is this seeming principal agreement on the relevance of the overall process on European level which has likely underpinned the ability of the EQFAG group to override national preferences on certain issues, despite the subsidiarity principle.

Concluding comments

The core question for the article was how an expert group such as the EQFAG can become institutionalized, taking into account the subsidiarity principle and temporary nature of the group. This article illustrates how institutionalization processes on some aspects can take place over short periods of time and how formal mandates can informally become widened, also in areas where earlier joint coordination had been met with suspicion. While education has been a sensitive policy area, the EQF appears to have found a common denominator in the policy debates across Europe in assuring political will for action. While the EQFAG was initially termed as temporary, the analysis in this article highlighted how sustainability of the group was a central interest, as new tasks were added, accompanied with a shifting conception of the processes related to the EQF. This was underpinned by stable participation of a limited set of core actors with high expertise, as well as a rapid development of standardized procedures and practices. As the group provided a seemingly neutral and expertise-based arena for discussion, it was viewed as relevant. It is in particular these two aspects that made the group more stable and resistant towards turnover of individual actors.

For studies examining overarching qualifications frameworks, the study shows that the kind of structures that are created can also alter governance structure on European level, beyond traditional structures and relations. The case also shows how such groups can fill a space on European level and create arenas for discussing ideas beyond sectoral

divides. Thus, not only is it transnational by involving both member states and various experts and stakeholders, it is also cross-sectoral by involving various educational sectors. Furthermore, such constellations can engage members from different governance levels, thus being a prime example of new governance arrangements in the context of multi-level governance of education in Europe. The structure examined in this article in that sense went beyond a traditional expert group with an advisory function. A number of these additional tasks were not formally written down. Instead, there was an informal agreement within the group regarding the limits and capacity of this group.

This study also opens up new avenues for further research. For studies on expertise on European level, it shows that detailed single case studies can also provide valuable insights to understand what kind of roles and functions such expert groups take. The case also illustrates the changing nature of governance of education in the EU, where such arenas can be seen as a laboratory for the Commission to test and spread upcoming ideas to assure compliance in the context of soft governance and OMC. In an area where joint coordination has been constrained, this is considerable policy innovation. However, while the study identified that there was an institutionalization process going on, it also showed that a number of contestations remained, emphasizing the need to continue studies of how transnational actors and arenas interact in joint coordination of European higher education.

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