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The European Qualifications Framework:

supporting learning, work and
cross-border mobility

10th Anniversary



Social Europe

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Foreword



“In our modern world, people need opportunities to build their skills and put them to use as they move between jobs, types of work, and further training. The European Qualifications Framework is a cornerstone of our cooperation on making people’s skills and qualifications more easily understood and recognised when they move either at home or abroad for work or study. Thanks to the EQF, employers can more easily compare foreign qualifications to national ones and better understand the skills profiles of candidates. The EQF helps people put their talent to use, smoothing the path to further learning and supporting a better skills match in the labour market.”

Marianne Thyssen

European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility

Introduction

In our modern world, people need a higher and broader set of skills to work, communicate, access information, products and services, and take part in social and civic activities.


A proper understanding and valuing of skills and qualifications is fundamental in order to achieve a better match between the supply of skills and the needs of the labour market. A shared European framework can support the understanding and valuing of skills and qualifications. It can also help individuals to acquire and update skills throughout their life as they move between different types and levels of education, and between education and employment, within and across countries.

Qualifications express what people know, understand and are able to do. They can take different forms such as a (university) diploma or (skills crafts) certificate. Transparency about what people actually learned in order to obtain a qualification ('learning outcomes') is key to ensuring that individuals, employers and education and training providers give the appropriate economic, social and academic value to qualifications.

The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) aims to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications. The EQF was set up in 2008 as a common reference framework of qualifications, expressed as learning outcomes at increasing levels of proficiency. The framework serves as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels. It is intended to benefit learners, workers, job-seekers, employers, trade unions, education and training providers, qualification recognition bodies, government authorities and international organisations.

The EQF Recommendation was revised in 2017¹ in order to adapt it to the reality of today and be ready for the challenges of tomorrow. Its revision has kept the core objectives agreed a decade ago to create transparency and mutual trust in the landscape of qualifications in Europe. The revision was one of the 10 key actions of the New Skills Agenda for Europe, which aims to improve the quality and relevance of training, make skills more visible, and improve skills intelligence.² As its name suggests, the EQF is also one of the frameworks to help deliver on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.³ The very first of the Pillar's 20 principles is that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market.

1 http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2017.189.01.0015.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2017:189:FULL
2 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>
3 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/pillar>



The EQF: what is it and how does it work?

What is a qualification?

The EQF defines a qualification as *‘the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards’*.

Why are qualifications important?

Qualifications serve a variety of purposes. They signal to employers what their holders are expected to know, do and understand (‘learning outcomes’). They may be needed to access certain professions. They help education and training authorities and providers to determine the level and content of learning acquired by an individual. They are also important for an individual as an expression of personal achievement. Qualifications play an important role in raising employability, easing mobility and improving access to further education.

Qualifications usually take the form of certificates and diplomas awarded following education, training, learning and (sometimes) work. The content and the level of qualifications that are part of a quality assured framework are trusted sources of information. They act as a form of currency that individuals can use for employment or further learning purposes.

Making qualifications more transparent and comparable across countries

European education and training systems are diverse and reflect national traditions. The differences between them make it difficult to assess what someone with a qualification from another country knows, understands and is capable of doing in learning or work contexts. The value of a qualification awarded in one country is therefore not necessarily understood in others, which can hamper ‘trust’ in the quality and content of such qualifications. The same goes for qualifications awarded outside of formal education and training systems, and by international bodies and organisations. This lack of trust can impact professional development, access to employment opportunities and access to further learning, creating barriers to mobility in the EU, within and across borders.

The EQF is a common reference framework that allows qualifications from different countries to be compared easily. This is achieved by supporting the use of learning outcomes for each qualification, in order to make them more transparent and easier to understand. In this way, the EQF supports the cross-border mobility of learners and workers, and promotes lifelong learning and professional development across Europe.

What is a qualifications framework?

A qualifications framework classifies qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved. It aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications, as well as improve the transparency, accessibility and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market, the education and training system, and civil society.

Qualifications frameworks support lifelong learning (i.e. all learning activity undertaken throughout life), with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. This definition covers the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

EQF: learning outcomes as a main principle

Qualifications have traditionally provided information about the duration of learning and the institution or location where the learning has taken place. Information on what to expect from the holder of the qualification, in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, has been less common and transparent.

The EQF, and all National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) that have been referenced to it, follow a learning outcomes approach. This means that both the content and the level of a qualification reflects what holders are expected to know, understand and be able to do (learning outcomes).

The shift to learning outcomes increases the transparency of a qualification and enhances its comparability between countries and within countries (e.g. between different types of qualifications at the same level, or different levels of qualifications of the same type). Through its focus on learning outcomes, the EQF can help citizens to find their way in an increasingly diverse and complex qualifications landscape.

A learning outcomes approach further supports a better match between the skills needs of the labour market and education and training provision, while also facilitating the validation of learning acquired in different settings. By focusing on what a learner knows, can do and can understand, learning outcomes help to open up qualifications to a wider variety of learning pathways and experiences.

The common reference framework of level descriptors is the core of the EQF

The EQF is defined by eight learning outcomes-based levels. Accompanying level descriptors show how expectations of knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility increase as learners progress from level 1 to level 8. These levels, along with the descriptors, function as a translation grid and make it possible to compare qualifications from different countries and institutions.

Learning outcome descriptors

The EQF learning outcome descriptors (see page 17) reflect two dimensions: the levels and the learning domains.

The *'level'* dimension captures how the complexity of the learning outcomes increases along with the qualification levels. For example, the level of autonomy expected of the holder of a level 2 qualification is much less than the expectations of a level 7 qualification holder.

The *'learning domains'* dimension distinguishes between *'knowledge'*, *'skills'* and *'autonomy and responsibility'*, allowing different types of qualifications to be classified at the same level. For example, qualifications with the same overall learning outcomes level can be of a more academic, vocational or professional orientation.

The EQF is designed to cover all types and levels of qualifications including those from higher education, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and general education, as well as qualifications awarded by the private sector or international organisations.

Boundaries of the EQF

Within the context of the EU, policies and actions in relation to skills and qualifications (except for those giving access to regulated professions) are based on Articles 165 (education) and 166 (vocational training) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. Both articles make it clear that EU action relates to encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting their education and training systems, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

The EQF is not:

- a framework to harmonise qualifications or qualifications standards between EU Member States (but it may lead to the development of similar qualifications between two or more countries);
- introducing automatic recognition of qualifications between EU Member States (but it may make recognition easier through the increased transparency that it brings);
- a framework focused on the classification of individual competences through its learning outcomes-based descriptors (but the EQF may inspire and facilitate the assessment and validation of, for example, skills acquired through work and life experiences).

How does EQF referencing work in practice?

The EQF Recommendation invites Member States to reference their NQFs or systems to the EQF, in order to establish a clear and transparent relationship between their national qualification levels and the eight EQF levels.

Given that the EQF is first and foremost a translation tool, qualifications are not directly included in the EQF. They are instead included in the NQFs, where their level and value abroad can be understood with reference to the eight EQF levels. This translation becomes visible to citizens as EQF levels are increasingly added to national certificates and diplomas, and included in the NQFs.

Each country wanting to relate its national qualifications levels to the EQF has to prepare a detailed referencing report that follows the 10 EQF referencing criteria agreed in Annex III to the revised EQF Recommendation.

The referencing criteria should ensure that NQFs are referenced to the EQF in a coherent and transparent way. The criteria also help with the structuring of referencing reports, which should include input and written statements from national quality assurance bodies and international experts.

EQF referencing criteria

1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the NQF or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.
3. The NQFs or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes, and are related to arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the NQF, or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system, are transparent.
5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the NQFs or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to the EQF Recommendation.
6. The referencing process shall include a stated agreement from the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.
7. The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statements of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.
8. The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the NQFs or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address each of the criteria separately. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.
9. Within six months of having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.
10. Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the NQF or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate/diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of NQFs or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

The role of the EQF Advisory Group

The EQF Advisory Group was set up in 2008 to ensure overall coherence and promote transparency and trust in the process of referencing. Its role was confirmed by the 2017 Recommendation.

The group is chaired by the European Commission and composed of national representatives (two per Member State and for each of the other 11 participating countries), labour market actors, education and training and civil society representatives, as well as the Council of Europe. It is supported by the expertise of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

The group discusses each referencing report in detail and provides feedback to the presenting countries. The presentation and discussion of the reports is intended to improve understanding of NQFs and systems between countries participating in the EQF implementation. The aim of this process is to arrive at a realistic understanding of NQFs and their link to the EQF, as well as qualifications included in the NQF and quality assurance mechanisms. In this peer review process, EQF members play the role of 'critical friends' and help colleagues from other countries to present their systems and qualifications in a transparent way.

A country has referenced to the EQF once the EQF Advisory Group considers its referencing report to be sufficiently transparent and respect all 10 EQF referencing criteria. If the Advisory Group does not find the report and the explanations given satisfactory, the country will be asked to provide clarifications or to submit a revised report during another EQF Advisory Group meeting.

As the central forum for discussion between the Commission, Member States and stakeholders on EQF implementation, the EQF Advisory Group plays an important role in building trust between the countries involved in the EQF. Trust is further developed through peer learning activities with a specific thematic focus.

The revision of the EQF Recommendation in May 2017

The establishment of the EQF kicked off the process of making qualifications in Europe more easily comparable. In 2017, the EQF Recommendation – reflecting strong support from all Member States – was revised to include new elements that will help the framework to adapt to the challenges of today and the future. These new elements included:

- an invitation to Member States to keep the referencing of their NQFs to the EQF up-to-date;
- revised quality assurance principles focused on qualifications;
- information exchanges and consultation between Member States in order to ensure consistency of the levels allocated to international qualifications included in their NQFs;
- the possibility of developing and applying criteria and procedures to enable third country qualifications frameworks to be compared with the EQF;
- recommendations regarding improved communication about the EQF.

Furthermore, existing practices were made more transparent by their inclusion in the Recommendation (e.g. the EQF referencing criteria).

Updating EQF referencing

EQF referencing reports represent a ‘snap shot’ in time and will eventually become outdated as NQFs and systems evolve. This is why the revised EQF Recommendation invites Member States to review and update their referencing report when relevant. Information included in the referencing reports should be accurate and transparent, as this directly influences the extent to which the NQF is trusted. In this way, the translation of national qualification levels into EQF levels will remain relevant and in line with national qualification systems. This also determines to what extent the EQF is able to facilitate the comparability and portability of qualifications.

The referencing of NQFs to the EQF, and the comparability available through this, also influences the review and renewal of national qualifications. The process of peer learning that takes place at EU level can show any changes in the education, training and qualifications system that may benefit learners.

Publication of referencing reports

Countries that have referenced to the EQF are invited to make the results of the process publicly available within six months, both at national and European level. At European level, this is currently done through the Learning Opportunities and Qualifications portal.

The countries can also share the information on their national qualifications databases or registers by linking them to the Learning Opportunities and Qualifications portal or publish their qualifications on the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) portal. Data on qualifications must include the EQF (and NQF) level, and information about learning outcomes. The published information makes qualifications readily accessible to individuals, employers, education and training providers, recognition bodies and so on.

EQF levels on certificates, supplements and in qualifications registers

Once referenced to the EQF, countries are invited to add a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level to all qualification documents issued by the competent authorities (e.g. certificates, diplomas, supplements), and/or qualification registers. Being shown on certificates and diplomas helps make the EQF (and the NQF) visible for individuals and employers.

EQF quality assurance principles

Trust in the quality and level of qualifications with an EQF level is essential in order to support mobility across sectoral and geographical borders, making quality assurance essential. The 2017 Recommendation reinforced the quality assurance principles of the EQF, which are expressed in the following ways:

- Member States should ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV, without prejudice to national quality assurance principles that apply to national qualifications.
- EQF referencing criteria 5 and 6 concern quality assurance. Criterion 5 demands that the national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the NQFs or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to the Recommendation. Criterion 6 states that the referencing process shall include a stated agreement from the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.
- Annex IV to the EQF Recommendation contains 10 quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of NQFs or systems referenced to the EQF. They state that all qualifications with an EQF level should be quality assured to enhance trust in their quality and level. The principles are compatible with the two existing European frameworks for quality assurance: the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) framework for higher education and the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) framework for VET.

Quality assurance principles for qualifications with an EQF level

In accordance with national circumstances, and taking into account sectoral differences, quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should:

- address the design of qualifications as well as the application of the learning outcomes approach;
 - ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards, and address the process of certification;
 - consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;
 - involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;
 - be composed of consistent evaluation methods, self-assessment and external review;
 - be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;
 - be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;
 - be supported by appropriate resources;
 - include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance;
 - include evaluation results that can be accessed electronically.
-

The EQF and credit systems

By using the learning outcomes approach, the EQF and NQFs should better support individuals when they are moving (i) between various levels of education and training, (ii) within and between sectors of education and training, (iii) between education and training and the labour market, and (iv) within and across borders.

Under the revised Recommendation, EU Member States agreed that if NQFs contain or are linked with credit systems, these need to be taken forward in a coordinated way in order to support transitions and facilitate progression. Seven principles have therefore been developed that are compatible with existing transparency tools for credit systems such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in higher education and the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) in VET.

The EQF and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area

The EQF is compatible with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and its cycle descriptors. The framework was agreed by education ministers of the intergovernmental Bologna Process in 2005. With the exception of Kosovo,⁴ all EQF countries take part in the Bologna process. The short cycle (that can be linked to, or within, the first cycle), the first, second and third cycles of the framework correspond to EQF levels 5-8 respectively.

The majority of countries that have referenced to the EQF have prepared a single report that also includes self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

4 This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Descriptors defining levels in the EQF



Knowledge

In the context of the EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.



Skills

In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).

	Knowledge	Skills
Level 1	Basic general knowledge.	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks.
Level 2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study.	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and solve routine problems using simple rules and tools.
Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information.
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study.
Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study, and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems.
Level 6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles.	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study.
Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge, in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research. Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields.	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures, and to integrate knowledge from different fields.
Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study, and at the interface between fields.	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation, and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.



Responsibility and autonomy

In the context of the EQF, responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility.

Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context.	Level 1
Work or study under supervision with some autonomy.	Level 2
Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study. Adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems.	Level 3
Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change. Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities.	Level 4
Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change. Review and develop performance of self and others.	Level 5
Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts. Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups.	Level 6
Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches. Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice, and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams.	Level 7
Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts, including research.	Level 8



How can the EQF be used and who benefits from the EQF?

The EQF was created for a number of purposes. While its key purpose is to help individual citizens pursue their learning and employment careers, the framework also supports stakeholders in education, training and employment to improve policies and practices. As a comprehensive and inclusive reference framework for qualifications, addressing all types and levels, the EQF has many users, varying from individuals, employers, trade unions, education and training providers, qualification recognition bodies to government authorities and international organisations.

Some experienced and expected benefits for different target audiences are summarised below.

The EQF supports careers in the labour market

Qualifications give access to jobs and provide the basis on which careers are built. Getting a job, or moving between jobs, requires qualifications to be understood, fairly judged and correctly valued by employers and other labour market stakeholders. The ability of a qualification to signal what its holder knows, understands and is able to do is therefore essential.

The use of learning outcomes to describe qualifications – and the inclusion of European and national qualifications levels on them – makes it easier for employers to interpret applicants' qualifications.

The EQF also enables employers to better assess qualifications from other countries and institutions not known to them. They can better understand the level of each candidate, compare their qualifications with national qualifications, understand the relevance of those qualifications and see how the learning outcomes match the needs of the company or sector.

Through the EQF, employers can treat Europe as one single qualification area. This reduces the barriers to labour mobility, supports a better use of existing knowledge, skills and competence, and improves the match between labour demand and supply.

The EQF promotes a common language between education and training and the labour market

By promoting the shift to learning outcomes, the EQF can also facilitate dialogue on the needs of the labour market and the provisions of the education and training systems. Structured dialogue using learning outcomes as a common language helps to strengthen the relevance and increase the attractiveness of qualifications.

The EQF and NQFs as a map helping learners make decisions on further education and training

The EQF, being closely linked to NQFs in 39 European countries,⁵ provides a comprehensive map of all types and levels of qualifications in Europe. Increasingly accessible through national qualification databases, learners can use the frameworks to identify the level of a particular qualification and how it is related to other qualifications. As a map linking together different NQFs, the EQF is relevant to different groups of learners and provides an easily accessible overview of qualifications and qualifications pathways. Individuals who seek further education or training can use the frameworks as an entry point to information on relevant courses and programmes.

The EQF and NQFs are a facilitator of lifelong learning

Opening up qualifications to a wider variety of learning experiences, for example from work and leisure time, is essential for promoting lifelong learning. The learning outcomes approach makes it possible to take into account experiences from outside formal education.

Validating non-formal and informal learning in Europe

Most European countries have now set up arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These arrangements make it possible for learners to have their prior learning identified, assessed and, if meeting agreed requirements and standards, recognised as a partial or full qualification. This is important for citizens as duplicate work is avoided, and diverse and rich learning experiences are taken into account.⁶

Flexible learning pathways are important preconditions for facilitating lifelong learning. Credit transfer and accumulation arrangements form part of this approach. The EQF and its learning outcomes approach supports credit transfer and accumulation and can, together with validation of non-formal and informal learning, directly facilitate lifelong learning.

5 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf>

6 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

Qualifications with an EQF level are a trusted currency

Because education and training systems differ between countries, it can be difficult to appreciate the value and relevance of foreign qualifications. As a result, there is a risk that qualifications are not fairly judged and assessed. The same problem can arise when combining qualifications from different education and training sectors and institutions.

The EQF levels are now increasingly being included in national certificates and diplomas across Europe, making it possible to see how a particular qualification relates to others in a wider European context. The systematic and long-term cooperation between countries through the EQF and NQFs, which act as gate-keepers of quality assured qualifications, ensure that these levels can be trusted across Europe. As a result, citizens can more easily distinguish between qualifications that can be trusted or those that cannot, or are 'fake'. This way the EQF also serves as a type of 'consumer protection'.

The EQF makes the recognition of qualifications easier

The EQF facilitates recognition of qualifications by promoting the use of learning outcomes, allowing holders and receivers of qualifications to directly assess the content, level and profile of the qualification in question.

The EQF works together with other European and international instruments supporting the recognition of qualifications. While these instruments either focus on regulated and/or academic qualifications, the EQF supports the recognition of learning for all qualifications.

European and international instruments supporting the recognition of qualifications

- Directive 2005/36/EC addresses the recognition of professional qualifications in the EU, enabling professionals to move across borders and practise their occupation or provide services abroad;⁷
- The Lisbon recognition convention⁸ is an international agreement administered by UNESCO and the Council of Europe that allows for the recognition of academic qualifications in Europe and beyond;
- The ENIC/NARIC network⁹ is a network of national centres set up to directly support institutions and citizens with the recognition of academic qualifications.

7 https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/qualifications-recognition_en

8 <https://rm.coe.int/168007f2c7>

9 <http://www.enic-naric.net/>

The EQF supports other EU transparency tools

The European Commission, in close cooperation with Member States, has launched a number of tools supporting the modernisation of European education and training systems over the last decade. Focusing on the need for increased transparency and comparability of skills and qualifications, these tools support the geographical and lifelong learning of citizens. The learning outcomes perspective can be seen as the 'glue' binding these tools together, respecting the diversity of national solutions but at the same time allowing them to work together.

Many of these tools address citizens directly, as is the case for Europass and the credit systems for higher education (ECTS) and VET (ECVET). While Europass supports individuals in their learning and careers, the credit systems facilitate flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning.

Another group of tools support the work of national authorities and institutions, and indirectly addresses the needs of individual citizens. This applies to a range of career guidance and validation of learning initiatives, where European initiatives are an incentive for setting up national arrangements and sharing practices. The tools supporting cooperation on quality assurance in higher education (ESG) and VET (EQAVET) aim to increase trust and transparency between countries. Furthermore, with the introduction of the ESCO classification, the Commission has put a terminology in place that supports a focus on learning outcomes and the strengthening of dialogue between stakeholders in education and training and the labour market.



What impact has the EQF had so far?

Overview

Since 2008, 39 countries have been engaging with the EQF. In addition to 28 EU Member States, this figure includes 11 non-Member States (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Iceland, Kosovo,¹⁰ Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey).

Currently, 35 countries (27 EU Member States and 8 non-Member States) have referenced their NQFs or systems to the EQF. This means that a clear link has been established between national and European levels. Most referencing reports have also been published on the Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe portal.¹¹

To reach full implementation and to raise awareness among the general public, countries should take actions so that their qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level. European levels should appear on qualification documents and in qualification databases or registers to make qualifications more transparent and comparable. The visibility of EQF levels is a key element of the success of the EQF implementation.

Currently, 23 countries referenced to the EQF display EQF levels on certificates, diplomas or Europass supplements, while 17 countries display EQF levels in qualifications databases or registers. A number of countries are now working to connect their databases to the Learning Opportunities and qualifications in Europe portal. They can also link their qualifications to the ESCO portal.¹²

Development of NQFs and the shift to learning outcomes

The EQF has had a major impact on the development of NQFs in Europe. Currently, 43 NQFs have been established, while only 3 existed before the adoption of the first EQF Recommendation in 2008.

Most countries have introduced eight-level frameworks, though some have less or more (e.g. the French framework has 5 levels, the Irish 10 and the Scottish 12). A number of countries also use sub-levels, which is seen as important in order to meet the interests of certain stakeholders and sometimes accommodate legacy awards.

While the early stages of the EQF were mainly focused on putting NQFs in place in order to reference these to the EQF, the current activities of many NQFs concentrate on allocating levels to individual qualifications and reviewing qualifications. Through the development of national frameworks, the EQF has therefore contributed to the improved transparency of national qualifications systems.

10 This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

11 <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/>

12 <http://ec.europa.eu/esco>

Dialogue between stakeholders

Another impact has been the involvement of, and dialogue between, education/training and employment stakeholders and different actors within the education/training area. Inspired by the EQF, nearly all referenced NQFs are comprehensive frameworks that include a broad spectrum of qualifications. As a result, permanent dialogue structures have been set up in several countries that include public authorities, higher education, VET, social partners and civil organisations.

NQFs and higher VET

EQF implementation and this dialogue have resulted in a higher level of parity between VET and higher education in some countries. EQF descriptors are neutral with regards to academic and professional training, and do not prescribe on what level different types of qualifications should be placed. The implementation of the EQF shows that vocationally- and professionally-oriented qualifications can also be referenced to levels 5-8 (for example, the German and Austrian master craftsman qualification are referenced to level 6, while the Swiss NQF is explicitly designed to support this principle).

Linking qualifications frameworks and the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning saw the link to NQFs as important for the further implementation of validation arrangements across Europe. The 2016 update of the European inventory on validation¹³ confirmed that countries now give high priority to linking frameworks and validation arrangements. EQF and NQFs, through their focus on learning outcomes, act as a reference point for identifying, documenting, assessing and recognising learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings.

Qualifications awarded outside formal education and training

Most European NQFs cover qualifications offered within formal education and training (e.g. VET, higher education and general education). These qualifications are regulated and awarded by national authorities. However, there is a growing trend among countries to open up their frameworks to include qualifications awarded in continuing and further education and training, which are often awarded outside the formal national qualification system.

Worldwide impact

The EQF and its level descriptors have been a source of inspiration for the development of qualifications frameworks worldwide. Currently more than 150 NQFs are in existence or under development.¹⁴ A positive side effect of the EQF being relatively well-known outside Europe has been that qualification recognition bodies more easily understand qualifications, which facilitates their recognition.

13 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>
14 <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/406d3baf-deef-11e7-9749-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



A look to the future

The revision of the EQF Recommendation in May 2017 gave the EQF process a new impetus. The Recommendation invites Member States to review and update their referencing to the EQF when relevant, which helps to ensure that the information underpinning the referencing is accurate, transparent and reflects any relevant changes at national level. At the same time, the core of the EQF process, namely referencing NQFs and their levels to the EQF, remains in place.

The revised Recommendation marks an important step in the coming of age of the EQF. While the early stages of the EQF were mainly focused on referencing NQFs to the common reference framework, the process is now characterised by the inclusion of qualifications in frameworks. All framework qualifications referenced to the EQF should respect the common quality assurance principles of Annex IV to the Recommendation.

In the context of the EQF, setting up procedures to give levels to international qualifications included in national frameworks will be a new field of work in which information exchange and consultation between Member States will be crucial for consistency.

The revised Recommendation also opens up possible cooperation with third countries in order to enable comparison of their (national or regional) qualifications frameworks with the EQF. Such cooperation could strengthen the comparability of European and third country qualifications, and facilitate mobility of both EU and non-EU citizens.

In the near future, further work will also be done on the description, use and application of learning outcomes to increase transparency and the understanding and comparability of qualifications.

Communication will be improved in order to better reach out to employers, education and training providers, learners, workers and other stakeholders and inform them about the EQF's and NQFs' benefits. In order to show the added value of the EQF and stimulate its use, the revised Recommendation continues to emphasise the importance of displaying the appropriate EQF levels on qualifications.

Finally, the EQF is also equipped to deal with future developments in learning and work. To adapt to today's digital world, the EQF levels can also be displayed on qualifications databases. Moreover, a common set of data fields for the electronic publication of information on qualifications with an EQF level is included in the revised Recommendation. This will help all involved to keep pace with new ways of sharing and linking information for the benefit of learners, workers, job-seekers and employers. Work on European portals in order to make sure information on qualifications is accessible and published will also continue, adapting to the needs of tomorrow's reality.

Acronyms

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training	Cedefop
European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training	ECVET
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System	ECTS
European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning	EQF
European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training	EQAVET
European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations	ESCO
European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area	ESG
European Training Foundation	ETF
European Union	EU
National Qualifications Framework(s)	NQF(s)
Vocational Education and Training	VET

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The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) aims to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications. This brochure has been published to mark the 10th anniversary of the EQF and provides an overview of the framework in general, how it can be used and who benefits. It also highlights the achievements of the EQF over the last 10 years and takes a look into the future.

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