

Online workshop

The role of NQFs in the Union of Skills *Your perspective matters!*

Background paper

1. Objectives of the workshop

The [workshop](#) will give the floor to policymakers, stakeholders, experts, researchers, social partners and the wider public to discuss the role that [National qualifications frameworks \(NQFs\)](#) can play in the Union of Skills. Participants will have the opportunity to exchange views on how NQFs can better promote the portability of qualifications and skills, responding to the needs of people living within and outside Europe.

Through three parallel breakout sessions, the workshop will seek to address the following key questions:

- (a) How can awareness and use of NQFs among learners, workers, jobseekers and companies be improved?
- (b) How do NQFs contribute to facilitating the recognition of foreign (EU and non-EU) qualifications?
- (c) How can NQFs respond to the challenges of the digital transition?
- (d) How can NQFs contribute to achieving the objectives of the Union of Skills?

2. NQFs/EQF and Cedefop's role

The [European qualifications framework \(EQF\)](#) for lifelong learning was adopted in 2008 and revised in 2017 ([Council of the European Union, 2017](#)). It has significantly contributed to increasing transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe. It has also triggered the development of learning outcomes-based NQFs in most of the 41 countries participating in the EQF process ⁽¹⁾. All EU Member States have referenced their NQFs to the EQF, raising the total to 37 EQF countries.

Cedefop's work on qualifications frameworks dates back to 2003. The agency has contributed to the conceptual development of the EQF and has supported its further implementation, working alongside national authorities and stakeholders to introduce and develop NQFs. Cedefop publishes a [European inventory of NQFs](#), which systematically maps and analyses NQF developments in Europe. The inventory is updated biennially in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation (ETF). This work also feeds into the [NQF online tool](#) and the [Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks](#). Based on the latest data collected from the inventory, the policy brief [Making qualifications and skills more visible](#) provides

⁽¹⁾ The 27 EU Member States, EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland), EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine), and potential candidate countries (Kosovo).

insights into NQFs' main characteristics, scope and coverage, along with a discussion on their impact and the extent to which they are used.

3. Increasing awareness and use of NQFs among citizens

With European NQFs at a mature development stage, NQF developers and implementers (e.g. qualification developers and public authorities) usually have a solid understanding of how NQFs function. However, awareness among end-users (e.g. learners, workers, jobseekers and employers) varies by country and overall remains moderate or low (Cedefop, 2025).

The use of NQFs by learners is still limited; they mainly use them when planning their studies abroad or for recognising knowledge or qualifications acquired abroad. Workers and jobseekers use NQFs to a lesser extent than learners. The most common ways of using NQFs are when developing their CVs, when aiming to work in another country, when looking for a job, and when trying to access further training. Nevertheless in the 2020s, the use of NQFs in the labour market has gradually increased. The level of awareness and use of NQFs among companies, trade unions, employer representatives and employment services varies by national context. Overall, remains rather limited. In 2024, the number of countries reporting that NQF/EQF levels are used in job advertisements and/or recruitment procedures rose slightly to 18 (15 in 2022) (Cedefop, 2025).

4. The use of NQFs in recognition procedures

In 2024, 34 EQF countries reported that they use their frameworks to recognise foreign qualifications. Although NQFs are often extensively used in recognition procedures, in some countries they serve as a complementary source of information. Where the NQF is extensively used, authorities reference foreign qualifications to NQF levels by comparing their learning outcomes with the framework's level descriptors. Some countries noted that the NQF is particularly valuable for VET qualifications, for which less information is available. Further, the EQF and NQFs contribute to attracting talent from third countries. For example, Sweden has developed a [qualifications assessment tool](#) that enables individuals to identify the equivalent Swedish qualification, compare qualifications, and better understand the Swedish qualifications system through the NQF (Cedefop, 2025).

5. NQFs and the digital transition

NQF databases and registers are vital tools in NQF implementation. They promote NQFs and increase the transparency of qualifications, allowing individual users to understand their content better and helping employers to trust them. For example, 28 NQF databases or registers provide users with learning outcomes descriptions of the qualifications they include. Although countries are working towards developing new databases or improving existing ones, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Approximately half of the EQF countries still do not include all NQF qualifications in an online database, and six EQF countries do not have an operational database or register at all.

As Europe experiences the effects of the digital transition, online databases are essential to enable EQF countries to unlock the full potential of the EQF and NQFs. Providing learning outcomes descriptions of qualifications and linking them to Europass, are two major preconditions for developing a detailed and comprehensive European map of qualifications with a 'zoom-in' functionality. Such a map will make qualifications and skills visible and understandable across borders, promote education progression and lifelong learning and contribute to addressing skill shortages across Europe (Cedefop, 2025).