



## NQF DEVELOPMENTS 2019

### National qualifications frameworks bring European education and training systems closer together and closer to end users

For years, the European qualifications framework (EQF) and national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) across Europe have helped build bridges across different countries and education and training systems. They have contributed to strengthening trust in qualifications across borders and systems, fostering quality, transparency and comparability. Many NQFs are now fully operational, firmly anchored in national education and training systems; they are undergoing updates and supporting synergies between European policies and tools such as guidance, validation and Europass. The EQF, based on learning outcomes, is the central hub linking all NQFs across Europe.

During this time <sup>(1)</sup>, Cedefop has monitored the development of NQFs and played an important role in shaping progress of the EQF <sup>(2)</sup>. This year marks yet another step forward in the frameworks' history: the European Commission has invited participating countries to connect their national databases to the **new Europass portal** <sup>(3)</sup>. This integrates the former **Learning opportunities and qualifications portal (LOQ, which is part of Ploteus)**, replacing it as the EU's central platform for information on qualifications. By supporting interoperability of national and European qualifications databases, the European Commission is creating a novel tool to support regulators, employers, researchers, and individual learners across Europe. Europass will be the common European front office, providing a single-entry point to all qualifications of the various NQFs.

A total of 39 countries participate in the EQF process, deepening and widening their frameworks and their cooperation <sup>(4)</sup>. They are now focusing on making the content and profile of individual qualifications

more transparent. By offering mainstreamed information on qualifications through their databases <sup>(5)</sup>, they are extending their outreach to stakeholders and the wider public, ultimately also beyond their borders. Countries have also been broadening the scope of their NQFs. Most frameworks now include all nationally recognised formal qualifications from VET, general, higher and adult education. In recent years, they have also been capturing qualifications awarded outside formal education and training and helping validate non-formal and informal learning <sup>(6)</sup>; they are becoming genuine maps for lifelong and life-wide learning and guidance.



In parallel, countries have been looking for evidence on the added value frameworks offer to different groups of users, including qualification designers, students and employers. To understand the current state of implementation and to plan for the future, countries have been carrying out NQF monitoring

<sup>(1)</sup> Since the first consultation on an **EQF recommendation** in 2005.

<sup>(2)</sup> The **revised EQF recommendation** was published in 2017.

<sup>(3)</sup> The new Europass was launched on 1 July 2020.

<sup>(4)</sup> EU Member States, EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein and Switzerland), EU candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey), potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo), and the UK.

<sup>(5)</sup> Countries have agreed on key data that need to be available. Annex VI of the 2017 EQF recommendation lists elements for data fields for the electronic publication of information on qualifications with an EQF level: title of the qualification, ISCED field, country, EQF level, description of the qualification in learning outcomes, and awarding/competent body are required. Optional elements include information on credits/workload, quality assurance, and entry requirements.

<sup>(6)</sup> See also the **European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018** which Cedefop regularly updates in cooperation with the European Commission and the ETF.

studies. The most recent are Slovenia and Greece, with another planned in Portugal <sup>(7)</sup>.

## TWO EQF TARGETS WITHIN REACH

### Linking NQF levels to the EQF

Countries' work towards the first EQF target – linking ('referencing') their national qualification levels to the EQF – is almost complete. This process has been central to the EQF implementation from the outset. So far, it has been achieved by 36 countries <sup>(8)</sup> and the remaining three will follow shortly.

However, referencing reports are a 'snapshot' at a given point in time. As systems and frameworks constantly evolve, the 2017 EQF recommendation invites countries to review and update the information underpinning reports periodically: the more accurate and up-to-date it is, the more the EQF process is trusted and used to compare qualifications. Six countries have already updated their reports <sup>(9)</sup>. Such updates provide an opportunity to reengage both with national stakeholders and an international audience.

Meanwhile, most of the countries which have linked their NQFs to the EQF have also self-certified their frameworks against the Bologna higher education framework (QF-EHEA) <sup>(10)</sup>. Combining both has become the norm.

### Visibility of NQFs and EQF levels

33 countries <sup>(11)</sup> have also moved on with the second EQF target: to indicate the corresponding EQF/NQF level on the qualifications registered in their national databases, the diplomas and certificates they award, and the Europass supplements. This promotes NQFs' benefits for end users.

Some countries have started to do this only recently while others have so far privileged VET over general education. Denmark, Estonia, Poland and Slovenia,

for instance, have set out to label all their new certificates and diplomas for NQF-registered qualifications. Further work on labelling will be crucial to the visibility and wider use of the EQF.

## RECENT PROGRESS IN NQF DEVELOPMENT

### NQFs: Striving for completeness

36 countries are working towards comprehensive frameworks <sup>(12)</sup>. Besides formal education and training qualifications at all levels, which are now included in most countries' NQFs, fully comprehensive frameworks will increasingly include qualifications awarded outside formal education and training by private providers, sectors, companies and international bodies. Some countries have already included regulated qualifications awarded outside formal education and training, e.g. by other ministries or national agencies. This is true, for instance, of Cyprus' system of vocational qualifications (SVQ), the systems of occupational qualifications in Estonia, Montenegro, Slovakia and Turkey, and the Slovenian system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs).

The number of countries that have opened their frameworks to include non-nationally regulated/private qualifications has risen in 2019/20 and now includes Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and UK-Scotland.

Italy is working towards a comprehensive framework, legally adopted in 2018; its *Work and qualifications atlas* is an occupations and qualifications database reflecting the high number and diversity of regional VET qualifications. 4 000 regional qualifications have been included in this database so far.

Finland has started to assign levels to competence modules, defined in learning outcomes. They compare with qualifications or constitute a qualification requirement. A working group has been looking into how the FiNQF could be extended to new qualifications and competence modules regulated by law. As a result, new competence modules at NQF levels 2 to 7 were included in the framework in February 2020, and since March 2020, administrative branches and interest groups can suggest new such modules for inclusion.

This development is to be seen in light of European countries' increasing interest in micro-credentials, which are considered to play an important role in EU

<sup>(7)</sup> A wealth of information, including previous briefing notes on NQF developments, is available on [Cedefop's NQF project page](#).

<sup>(8)</sup> Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

<sup>(9)</sup> Belgium (fl), Estonia, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, and the UK. France and Ireland are planning to present their updated reports in autumn 2020.

<sup>(10)</sup> Except for Belgium (fr, de), Czechia, France, Greece, Italy, Kosovo and Slovakia.

<sup>(11)</sup> By March 2020: Belgium (fr, fl), Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, France, Italy Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, as well as Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK.

<sup>(12)</sup> Czechia and Switzerland operate separate frameworks for vocational/professional and higher education qualifications. In the UK (ENI), the new framework is broader in scope than the previous one, covering all regulated academic and vocational qualifications. Levels 5 to 8 compare to those of the HE frameworks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish and Welsh frameworks are comprehensive.

## BOX 1. A NEW INTEREST IN MICRO-CREDENTIALS ACROSS EUROPE



Micro-credentials need to be understood in the context of the evolution of qualifications and credentials systems in recent decades. The shift to learning outcomes, the introduction of qualification frameworks, modularised programmes, the recognition of micro-credentials and the validation of non-formal and informal learning are all interlinked: they help create more flexible systems which can integrate/recognise a wide range of individual learning outcomes and experiences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

While recognising that there is a case for flexible and learner-centred solutions, some stakeholders argue that systems integrating a host of piecemeal credentials may lose transparency and undermine the status of strong initial education and training which lays the groundwork for individuals' future adaptation and change (\*).

(\*) Cedefop's 2010 study *Changing qualifications in Europe* provides a reference for this contextualisation, notably by outlining a set of scenarios for the development of qualification systems in Europe up to 2020.

countries' reskilling and upskilling efforts in response to the Covid-19 crisis and beyond (see box 1).

Since 1 October 2019, the **Danish Accreditation Institution** has been assessing, at the request of providers, the level of such qualifications, based on their learning outcomes. The aim is to promote market transparency, quality assurance and to open pathways into the formal system for holders of such qualifications.

In late 2019, Austria started to level non-legally regulated qualifications, acquired through paths such as adult learning, continuous learning, and youth work. To this end, six NQF service points were established in November 2019. Qualification providers who want to have a qualification included in the NQF, can submit a detailed description to one of these service points, including the related learning outcomes and assessment procedure. The **NQF service points** advise and support providers in submitting their qualifications for inclusion in the NQF, ensuring that they meet the required quality criteria and that all necessary information and evidence is available to allow for a decision on NQF inclusion and levelling.

Preparatory work on inclusion of non-formal qualifications has also started in Ireland.

### Enriching national qualifications databases

To benefit end users, NQFs have to make available clear information on single qualifications. To look for work or studies abroad, users need to be able to consult the qualifications database of the country they are interested in. In 2019, many countries have made progress in creating, filling and mainstreaming their national qualification databases, which serve a broad range of purposes.

## BOX 2. BROADENING THE SCOPE OF THE IRISH NQF

The 2019 **Qualifications and Quality Assurance Amendment Act** strengthens the regulatory role of the Irish State agency responsible for the NQF, **QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland)**, giving it statutory power to include in the NFQ qualifications issued by a range of awarding bodies.

For the NFQ to be comprehensive and to recognise all learning achievements in line with its objectives, QQI is granted legal powers to establish a new class of awarding bodies, to be known as a 'listed awarding body'. Private, professional and international awarding organisations will be able to apply to QQI to become listed awarding bodies for the purpose of having their qualifications included in the NFQ. Applications are considered on the basis of their capacity as awarding organisations and on the usefulness of the qualification presented for inclusion. Policy and procedures to give effect to the establishment of listed awarding bodies, will be informed by the quality assurance principles of the EQF recommendation.

Source: Cedefop, NQF overview 2019, Ireland.

The 31 countries' databases <sup>(13)</sup> still differ greatly. Not all provide learning-outcomes-based descriptions of qualifications or indications of EQF/NQF levels, and not all are interoperable. Many are only available in

<sup>(13)</sup> Albania, Austria, Belgium (fl, fr), Croatia (no qualifications included yet), Czechia (refers to NSK register), Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy and Iceland are preparing the groundwork. Source: Cedefop (forthcoming). Overview of NQF developments 2019; Auzinger et alii (unpublished). Mapping and analysis of national databases and registers of qualifications.

national languages. Most databases include qualifications from formal education (VET and HE qualifications, and general education qualifications are featured in about half of them), while some also include qualifications awarded outside formal education and training: Belgium (fl), Estonia, France, Poland, and Slovenia.

However, as the use of learning outcomes for defining and describing qualifications has significantly increased in the last decade, it is now possible for countries to provide mainstreamed information on the content and profile of qualifications, beyond tagging them with levels.

Databases of around 10 countries are now connected to European portals, particularly to the LOQ area in the new Europass, and around five to the [ESCO qualifications pillar](#).

Slovenia has recently linked its database to LOQ and ESC. This makes it accessible to stakeholders from beyond its borders, allowing them to examine its qualifications and compare them to those of their own country.

### Learning outcomes to design and compare qualifications

Learning outcomes are critical to clarifying the scope and orientation of qualifications and to promoting a learner-centred approach to education and training. They form the basis of comparability and trust. Countries have progressively adopted them to define and describe qualifications in terms of what they expect people to know, be able to do and understand after completing a VET programme and/or being awarded a qualification (see also [Cedefop 2009, 2016, 2017](#)).

EQF and NQF implementation, along with the development of other tools based on learning outcomes ([ESCO](#) and [WorldSkills standards specifications, WSSS](#)) have enabled Cedefop to explore and gain insight into the similarities and differences in the content and profile of 10 VET qualifications in 10 European countries<sup>(14)</sup>. This exercise revealed that mapping qualifications' learning outcomes against existing reference points can help identify a common core across countries.

With its continuing exploratory work<sup>(15)</sup>, Cedefop has been spearheading efforts to shed more light on the potential of learning outcomes.

<sup>(14)</sup> Cedefop (unpublished). First steps towards a learning-outcomes-based methodology for comparing VET-qualifications; the methodology was further tested in cooperation with the ETF and UNESCO in comparing four qualifications in 26 countries worldwide; and in a recent Cedefop study on IVET qualifications at EQF levels 3 and 4.

<sup>(15)</sup> [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/comparing-vet-qualifications](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/comparing-vet-qualifications)

### Helping validate non-formal and informal learning

The link between NQFs and the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been explored in the regular updates of the [European validation inventory](#) since 2010. The number of countries which have, in some way or other, linked non-formal and informal learning to their NQFs has risen from 12 in 2010 to 31 in 2018. In some, such as Belgium, Greece, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta, Poland and Slovakia, NQF development has actually driven validation initiatives. The 2020 [evaluation](#) of the [2012 recommendation on validation](#) of non-formal and informal learning shows, for example, that Belgium (fl) has developed a quality framework allowing for quality assurance of courses, resulting in a professional qualification at any level. This ensures that all people following such courses or procedures for recognition of prior learning, leading to the same professional titles, have obtained the same set of skills after completion of the course or procedure.

According to the 2018 edition of the [Validation inventory](#), NQF qualifications in 25 European countries can be obtained through validation. To varying degrees, this is also possible for modules, credits and partial qualifications. In a few countries, such as France and Luxembourg, all NQF qualifications, except the general baccalaureate, can be obtained through validation of non-formal and informal learning. Other countries, including Estonia, Slovakia and Slovenia, validate all qualifications registered in occupational sub-frameworks. In Czechia (where CVET qualifications are included in the national VET qualifications register), continuous and adult education qualifications are primarily acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In 13 countries, according to the 2018 validation inventory, it is possible to obtain a qualification (or part of it) through labour market actor initiatives: they often involve training providers and national employment services as well as chambers of industry, commerce and crafts, which can provide certification. In contrast, validation initiatives in the third sector are rarely linked to qualification; they are more often focused on formative validation, the identification and documentation of learning that takes place in this sector, rather than on gaining an NQF qualification.

### Making higher vocational education and training visible

NQF development has prompted policy debate on higher vocational education and training<sup>(16)</sup>. Demand

<sup>(16)</sup> [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5570](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5570)

for highly qualified specialists has been on the rise in recent years and, according to [Cedefop's skills forecasts](#), this trend is likely to continue. This demand does not only concern university degrees; it focuses increasingly on higher level vocational skills and certification possibilities for employed skilled workers. In many countries, such programmes and qualifications are offered outside regulated formal education and training, provision is heterogeneous, and often fragmented and non-transparent. This impairs understanding of, and trust in, these qualifications.

NQFs, with levels based on learning outcomes, have helped reveal the diversity and increasing importance of VET provision at EQF levels 5 to 8; they also help structure it. Intensive debate on the future of VET at these levels continues. The Swiss NQF is explicitly designed to accommodate an array of vocational and professional qualifications ranging from level 3 to level 8. Germany [amended its legislation in January 2020](#) to reinforce parity of esteem between academic studies and higher VET by legally assigning to them the same NQF levels. The title Meister is now legally equivalent to professional bachelor and NQF-levelled professional master degrees are equivalent to university master degrees. In Austria, stakeholders are working towards making higher VET qualifications more visible in a separate education segment labelled 'higher vocational education and training'. Discussions on the content and implementation of such a HVET segment continue <sup>(17)</sup>.

### BOX 3. HVET AND VALIDATION IN SWEDEN

The [National Agency for Higher Vocational Education](#) was set up in 2009 to administer vocationally oriented higher education (*Yrkeshögskolan*) and to ensure it meets the Swedish labour market's qualification needs. The agency is also responsible for coordinating the SeQF and is now required to coordinate recognition of prior learning. The fact that these responsibilities lie with the same State agency shows that a close link between the NQF and validation is seen as critical, also in view of integrating foreign workers in the national labour market. The agency will also coordinate sectoral validation approaches.

### Impact of NQF levelling decisions

Speaking a common language across national borders, education sectors and between education and the labour market is a major consequence of mapping NQFs to the EQF and levelling country's qualifications using learning outcomes. Depending on the

countries, this common language has yielded various benefits:

- in Germany, it has increased acceptance of parity of esteem of general (higher) education and VET;
- in Switzerland, the use of learning outcomes in the description of qualification profiles and ordinances has led to greater consistency of professional regulations;
- the Scottish framework (SCQF), according to a 2016 review, impacts VET providers' ratings and improves their ability to market SCQF-registered programmes, as learners understand this as a quality seal;
- in Bulgaria, discussion on how to reference the NQF to the EQF has spurred reform initiatives within the national VET system;
- in Lithuania and Estonia, NQF implementation and discussions on transparency of qualifications have led to the identification – and the filling – of gaps in the provision of qualifications at EQF level 5. Portugal redesigned vocational qualification profiles where shortcomings appeared when describing them in terms of learning outcomes.

### A never-ending story

NQF development has consolidated in the past year, and European and national stakeholders' long-standing back-office work on qualifications and frameworks is now coming to the fore. The new front-office, the Europass portal, will connect more and more national qualifications databases and ensure their interoperability. Professionals and the wider public will be able to access the descriptions of qualifications. [Europass](#) will provide a range of supporting services which will benefit end users across Europe who are looking for working and learning opportunities abroad.

Countries will continue to expand and to mainstream their databases. Cedefop estimates that there are around 128 million adults with potential for upskilling or reskilling across the EU <sup>(18)</sup>. To accommodate pressing labour market needs triggered by digitalisation and industrial change, partly also in response to the continuing Covid-19 crisis, countries will likely integrate more and more qualifications, parts of qualifications and micro-credentials in their national frameworks. By mainstreaming the outcomes of formal, non-formal, informal, and even partial learning experiences, NQFs will encourage learning providers to make their offer more flexible, address users' needs for shorter and more targeted (online) courses to up-

<sup>(17)</sup> [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/does-austria-need-higher-vocational-education-and-training-education-segment?src=email&freq=daily](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/does-austria-need-higher-vocational-education-and-training-education-segment?src=email&freq=daily)

<sup>(18)</sup> Cedefop's calculation is based on Eurostat's labour force survey 2016, CSIS 2015 and OECD PIAAC 2012 and 2015. More information is included in Cedefop's 2020 publication [Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways](#).

skill or reskill, and allow for the validation of informal and non-formal learning. Frameworks will probably increasingly support the take-up and recognition of building blocks of lifelong and life-wide learning and take steps to ensure their portability and ‘stackability’.

However, challenges remain. From the outset, the development of national frameworks has been driven by the education and training sector, while businesses and economic sectors have been more reluctant to embrace them. This lack of appeal to economic actors may hamper their ability to deal, for example, with private qualifications or micro-credentials.

Also, the countries participating in the EQF still have to agree on a procedure for exchanging information and streamlining their approaches to assigning levels to international qualifications. For the moment, each country links these to its own NQF; the risk of levelling differences is obvious. While NQFs are valued as gatekeepers assuring the quality of qualifications, consistency across NQFs remains an issue, especially in view of the mutual trust forged over the years.

To respond to these challenges, stakeholders across Europe need to deepen their understanding of the content and profile of qualifications. To support comparison and allow for mainstreaming of qualifications across borders and systems, existing reference tools at European level, such as ESCO, need to be further refined and/or new ones developed.

Stakeholders involved in NQF implementation will increasingly be called upon to be more closely involved in their countries’ skills strategies. National frameworks, with their close link to labour markets and their focus on learning outcomes as a common language shared by education systems and labour markets, contribute to the continuous review and renewal of qualifications. Playing an ever-increasing role in countries’ responses to fast-changing skills needs, and in their efforts to provide upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning options to their workforces, comprehensive NQFs can contribute to ensuring policy coherence across systems and countries.

The **new Skills agenda**, launched on 1 July 2020, considers skills intelligence <sup>(19)</sup> as the foundation of the broad upskilling and reskilling endeavour European countries have to undertake in order to master the green and digital transitions which lie ahead. With its skills forecasts and its real-time analysis of on-line-jobs vacancies, Cedefop has been providing the groundwork for updating European and national skills strategies responsive to labour market needs.

<sup>(19)</sup> See in this context Cedefop’s long-standing work on **skills forecasts, mismatches and the future of jobs**.



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Europe 123, Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE  
Postal address: Cedefop service post, 57001, Thermi, GREECE  
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020  
Email: [info@cedefop.europa.eu](mailto:info@cedefop.europa.eu)

[www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)