



The European qualifications framework: promoting mobility and lifelong learning

Overview

On 23 April 2008 the Recommendation on a European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF) was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council. The EQF introduces – for the first time – a common reference framework to make it possible to compare accurately the profile and content of qualifications from different countries, sectors and institutions. This will help people to move not only between different countries, but also between different parts of national education and training systems.

Adoption of the EQF is a watershed in European education and training policies. It signals the end of four years of intensive work involving 32 European countries, during which Cedefop was closely involved in the EQF's conceptual and technical development.

The objectives of the EQF

The EQF is a lifelong learning framework. It includes qualifications from all sectors of education, including general and higher education, as well as vocational training. The EQF's core is eight reference levels of qualifications, covering qualifications awarded at the end of compulsory education (level 1) to the highest (level 8: doctorate or equivalent). The three highest levels correspond to higher education levels as defined in the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna process), or to highly specialised professional qualifications.

The Recommendation sets the year 2010 as the target for countries to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF. From 2012, all new qualifications awarded should bear a reference to the EQF levels. Employers and institutions can then identify someone's knowledge, skills or competences. For example, at the moment an enterprise in Ireland may hesitate to recruit someone from Hungary because it does not understand his or her qualifications. Once the EQF is implemented, Hungarian certificates will carry a reference, such as 'EQF level 5', allowing Irish employers to interpret much more easily the level of such qualifications.

By making it simpler to compare and understand qualifications from different countries the EQF will make mobility easier. The EQF complements existing programmes and instruments to help Europeans live and work anywhere in the EU, such as the Erasmus programme for student mobility and Europass which provides a standardised portfolio for people to describe their skills in a clear way.

An overarching framework for mobility and lifelong learning

Many countries are establishing their own national qualifications framework (NQF) to link to the EQF. Work is progressing rapidly, illustrating the high priority given to mobility and lifelong learning at national level.

Qualifications frameworks are increasingly seen as instruments to connect different parts of a country's education system, enabling people to pursue various



learning pathways. For example, people will be able to move more freely between different types of institutions such as universities or vocational training institutes, or gain recognition for non-formal learning.

The EQF and its national counterparts recognise the reality of modern careers and modern learning, where people's careers consist of various types of learning, some structured, some informal, but pursued throughout life. By supporting this flexibility the EQF and NQFs provide a framework to encourage mobility and lifelong learning and help meet the challenges of the knowledge economy.

Learning outcomes – the basis for the EQF

To work across different systems the eight levels of the EQF are based on learning outcomes (what a learner knows, understands and is able to do) rather than learning inputs (the length of a learning experience, type of institution, etc.).

For the EQF, the main challenge was to define clear and consistent descriptions of the EQF's eight qualifications levels based on learning outcomes. Each description had to be sufficiently general to cover all European countries, yet specific enough to make sense of particular qualifications at national and economic sector level. Experts agreed to use the distinction between knowledge, skills and competence (KSC) as a basis of the framework. This was seen as the most accurate way to categorise learning outcomes. A further challenge was to distinguish between the different levels of qualifications taking account of the:

- complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding;
- degree of necessary support or instruction;
- degree of integration, independence and creativity required;
- range and complexity of application/practice;
- degree of transparency and dynamics of situations.

The fact that experts from 32 countries agreed on a common approach shows their commitment to

making progress and willingness to find pragmatic solutions.

Cedefop's contribution to the EQF

Cedefop played a key role in the EQF's conceptual and technical development. As early as 2003 Cedefop initiated a study on a common reference framework for qualifications which provided the basis for the eight level learning outcomes approach which became the key feature of EQF.

Cedefop's involvement in the EQF reflects more than 30 years of systematic effort to improve transparency and comparability of qualifications in Europe. Particularly important was the European Forum on transparency of qualifications, set up in 1998, which, in many ways, paved the way for the learning outcomes approach.

Cedefop will continue its technical and scientific support for the EQF and its implementation at national and sectoral levels. The focus will be the rapidly emerging NQFs.

NQFs are crucial to reducing barriers between different parts of education and training systems, such as between VET and higher, academic education. They are also important for the parity of esteem between VET and general, academic qualifications. For example, they clarify the need to develop vocational skills at all levels of qualifications, including level 8. Cedefop will also focus on the link between the EQF and emerging international qualifications, such as those provided by sectors and multi-national companies.

