

Looking back to look ahead:
two decades of EU tools and
initiatives promoting
transparency and transferability
of learning outcomes and
qualifications



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training



Empowering individuals for better mobility

Transparency and recognition
of VET qualifications

15th CEDEFOP BRUSSELS SEMINAR

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Brussels

#CedefopBrusselsSeminar



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Shaping VET and qualifications

Cedefop

- actively supports the development and use of European tools and principles for transparency
- monitors VET policy developments across the EU
- looks into the future of VET





Structure of the presentation

- Information on project “Transparency and transferability of learning outcomes”
- The origins of the “transparency journey”
- The policy areas and initiatives identified as relevant
- Relationships between main initiatives
- Recognition of VET qualifications
- Consideration on the (combined) impact/contributions

Project on transparency and transferability of learning outcomes

Duration: 3 years
(2022-2025)

Overall aim

The project looks at European and national policy **initiatives** promoting transparency and transferability of learning outcomes **over the last 20 years** (2000-2020) to examine their relationships and the extent to which they have supported individual citizens' **lifelong learning and mobility**.

Future policy scenarios towards 2040 will be developed.

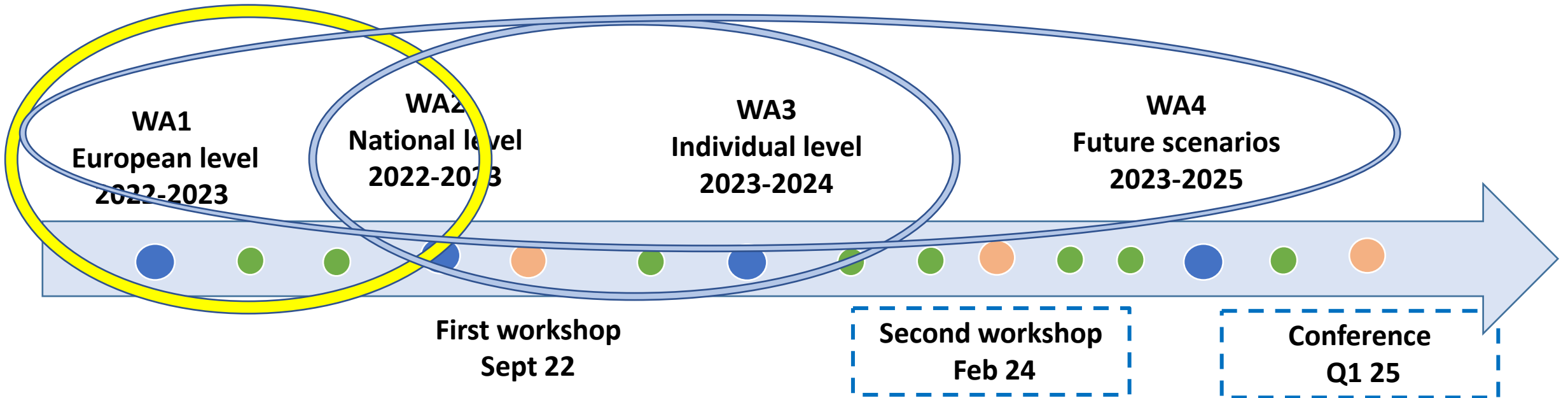
Timeline and methodology

Work assignment 1: European-level policies supporting transparency and transferability of learning outcomes

Work assignment 2: National policies supporting transparency and transferability of learning outcomes

Work assignment 3: Lifelong learning in 2000 and in 2020: what has changed for the individual citizen?

Work assignment 4: Scenarios for lifelong and life-wide learning: policy options and implications



Methodology

- Desk research
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Statistical analysis
- Eight country cases
- Surveys
- Panel discussions

The origins of the “transparency journey”

Between 1996 and 2000 → Growing awareness that **learning takes place throughout life** and in all venues of life -in education, at work and at home –and **that individuals must be able to combine and build on this learning.**

1996: European Year of Lifelong Learning

2000: Lisbon strategy

2001: Memorandum on lifelong learning

- The **concept of lifelong learning** was firmly put high on the political agenda
- Increasing awareness of the need for more **flexible** and open education and training systems
- Increasing attention to **transparency and transferability** of learning

Barriers to lifelong learning and mobility

Learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, is **less visible, not fully trusted and valued**.

Education, training and learning systems are **complex and diverse across and within countries**:

- difficult for **individuals** to understand opportunities;
- for **employers and education** and training providers understand learning acquired by applicants;
- difficult for **individuals** to move from one country to another maintaining their “educational and professional status”.

Education and training systems are **organised as ‘silos’** operating partly in isolation from each other

- not designed to foster mobility

Addressing barriers

- Increase **transparency** of systems and qualifications
- Promote **transferability** of learning

Transparency of qualifications: degree of visibility and legibility of qualifications and their content, as well as their value on the labour market (regional, national, international or sectoral) and in education and training systems.

Transferability of learning: the degree to which knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences can be used in a new occupational or educational environment, and/or be validated and certified.



The role of learning outcomes

what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process

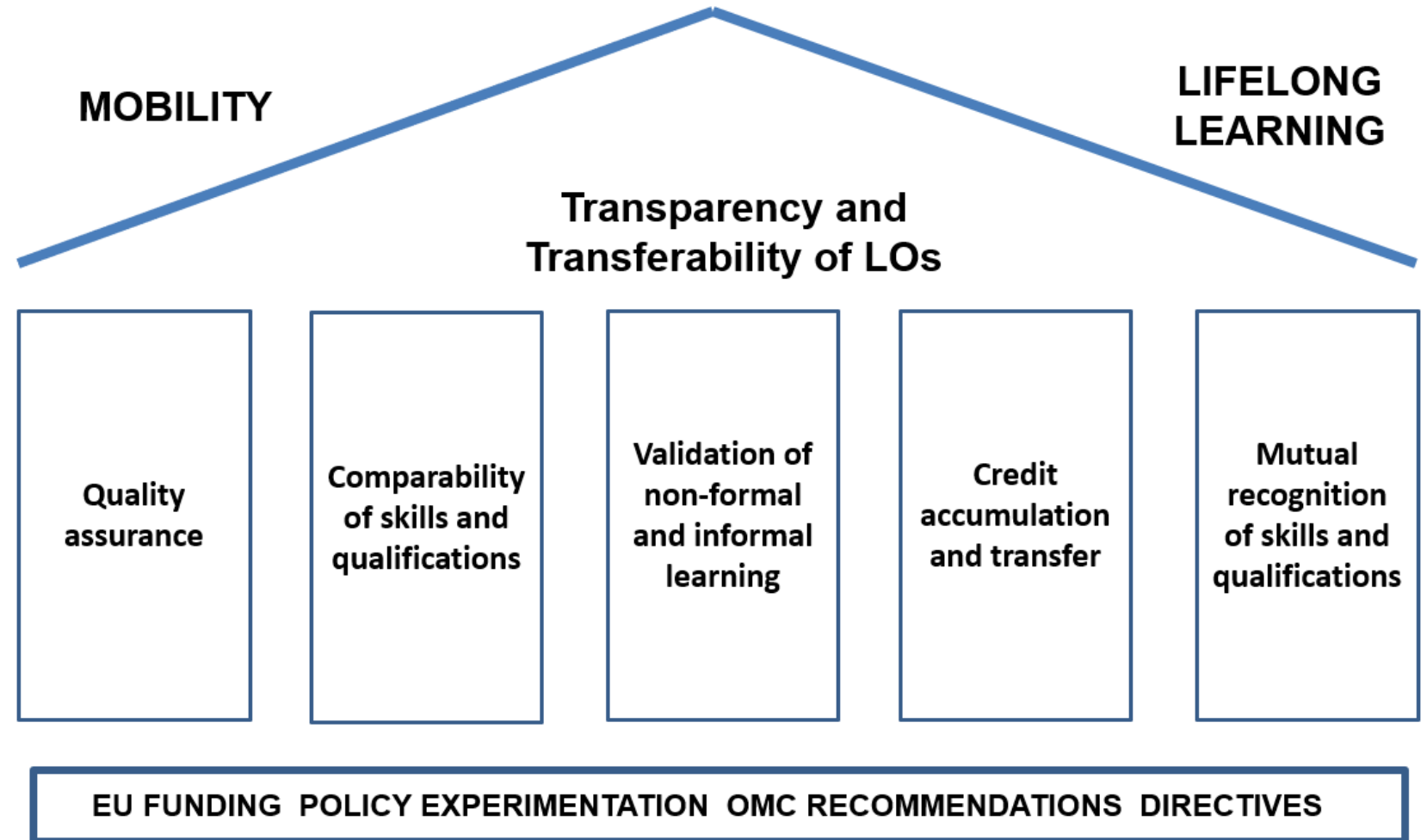
→ Gradual shift to learning outcomes approach

- Focus on outcomes (rather than inputs) → possibility to enhance the **transparency of what people have learnt**
 - This **supports those that need to make judgment** about the value of programmes or qualifications
- Allows **avoiding that learning is bound to the specific institutional, sectoral, and national context**
 - making possible to give value to all types of learning
- While national inputs differ, **outcomes can be compared.**
 - **Comparison supports recognition.**



POLICY AREAS

The study identified five thematic policy areas supporting transparency and transferability of learning outcomes



Overall policy context

- 2000 Lisbon agenda/strategy
- 1999 Bologna process and following communiqués
- 2002: The Copenhagen process and following communiqués, declarations and conclusions
- 2010: Europe 2020 Strategy (the successor to the Lisbon Agenda/Strategy)
- 2009: Strategic frameworks for European co-operation in education and training (ET 2010 and ET 2020)
- Recent developments: Skills agenda 2016 and 2020; 2017 European Pillar of Social Right; 2020 Osnabrueck Declaration;

Programmes

- 1995-1999/2000-2006: Leonardo Da Vinci I and II
- 1995-1999/2000-2006: SOCRATES I and II
- 2001-2010 Grundtvig
- 2007 -2013: Lifelong Learning programmes (LLP)
- 2014-2020 Erasmus + (and its predecessor Erasmus)

Funds

- European Social Fund (ESF)
- Employment & Social Innovation programme (EaSI)



Working methods

- Open method of cooperation
- Commission working groups

The set of policy initiatives analysed



Quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)- 2000• Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) – 2005 and 2015• European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) 2009 and 2020
Credits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) - 1985• European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) -2009-2020
Comparability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) -2008 and 2017• Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) - 2005• Europass (Diploma supplement, Certificate supplement, and Europass portal) -2004 and 2018• The multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, and Occupations (ESCO) -2017• Recommendation on Microcredentials (MC) - 2020
Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) - 2012
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) on recognition of academic qualifications 1997• Directive on Professional Qualifications 2005/36/EC and 2013/55/EC (PQD)• Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad - 2018

RELATIONSHIPS



Quality assurance initiatives in Higher Education and VET

- Considerable **similarities** with regards to overall **objectives, principles and orientation**
- Differences in their **governance and implementation**, largely due to the divide between HE and VET
- **At EU level** some efforts to strengthen links
 - ➔ 2017 **EQF** recommendation: common quality assurance principles compatible with principles in VET and HE
- At National level:
 - Often **different frameworks**
 - Examples of initiatives where **cross-sector cooperation is pursued** (e.g. Estonia, Ireland, Sweden, France);
 - Work on common principles is generally accepted but some national authorities **reservations** about how work this could be implemented and achieved

Main policy developments considered

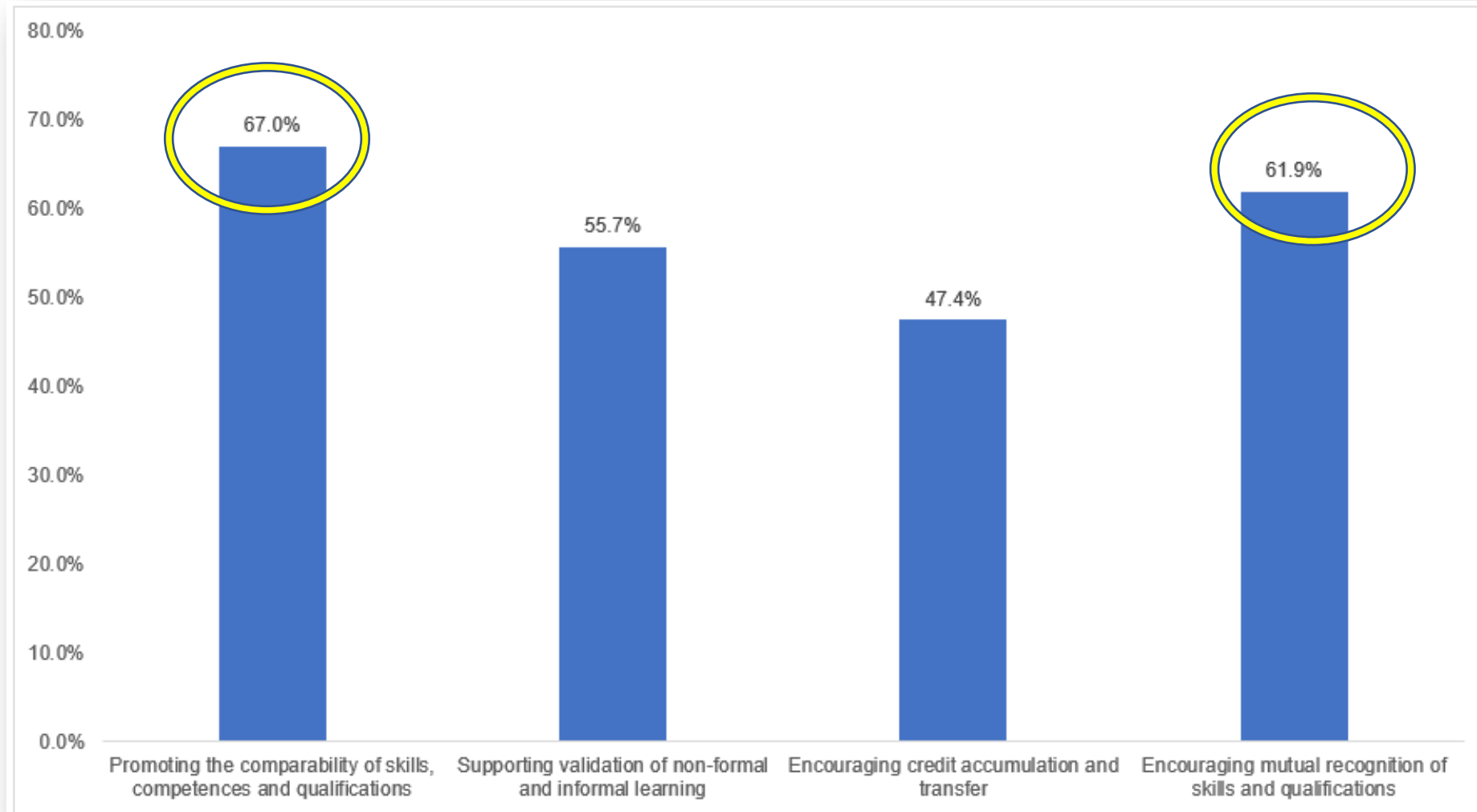
- 2000** → European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (**ENQA**)
- 2005** (revised in **2015**): Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (**ESG**)
- 2007/2008**: European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (**EQAR**)
- 2018**: Database of External Quality Assurance Results (**DEQAR**)
- 2009**: Recommendation on European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (**EQAVET**)
- 2010**: **EQAVET Network**
- 2020**: **Revised EQAVET framework** integrated in the 2020 VET Recommendation

Links between quality assurance (QA) and other initiatives

- **Quality assurance in Higher Education** (ENQA/ESG) is strongly connected with ‘**Bologna tools**’ (QF-EHEA; **credits** in HE and Europass diploma supplements) but there are also connection with the **EQF**.
- **Quality assurance in VET** designed to support implementation of the **EQF** but also work cooperatively with **credits in VET** (thematic and conceptual links) → over time the narrative on links weakened
 - National Level: limited use of ECVET led to limited links in practice at national level.
- Recognition/**validation** of non-formal and informal learning is considered important (ESG standards and EQAVET)
 - In HE “**still a long way to go**”
 - In VET **more focus** has been given to **formal VET** → no much alignment between validation and EQAVET at national level.
- No explicit links between EQAVET and **Europass certificate supplements**. However, the latter asks for information on quality assurance.
- Quality assurance in HE → Links with initiatives on **academic recognition of qualifications**
- Quality assurance in VET → the **Recommendation on automatic recognition** refers to EQAVET and its further developments.



Interconnections between national initiative on **quality assurance** and other areas - Survey insights



Original question: In your opinion, in your country to what extent are the national initiatives in the considered policy areas interlinked and mutually reinforcing each other?
N = 97
Graph: respondents selecting high-medium

Credits initiatives in Higher Education and VET

Main policy developments considered

1985: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

2009-2020: European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

- On the surface, there appear to be strong links as they had **similar objectives and coherence was encouraged**
- Design of the tool → **different concepts used**
- **Little evidence** to suggest that the desired **compatibility** between **was achieved** (so that credits could be transferred between the two systems).
- The 2020 VET recommendation (ends ECVET initiatives):
 - *“For vocational qualifications at post-secondary and tertiary level, the ECTS already in use may be applied”.*
- **National level:**
 - Variations in the way credits are used; resistance and low application of credits in VET;
 - Cases of integrated systems between HE and VET and ECTS used in sectors other than HE.

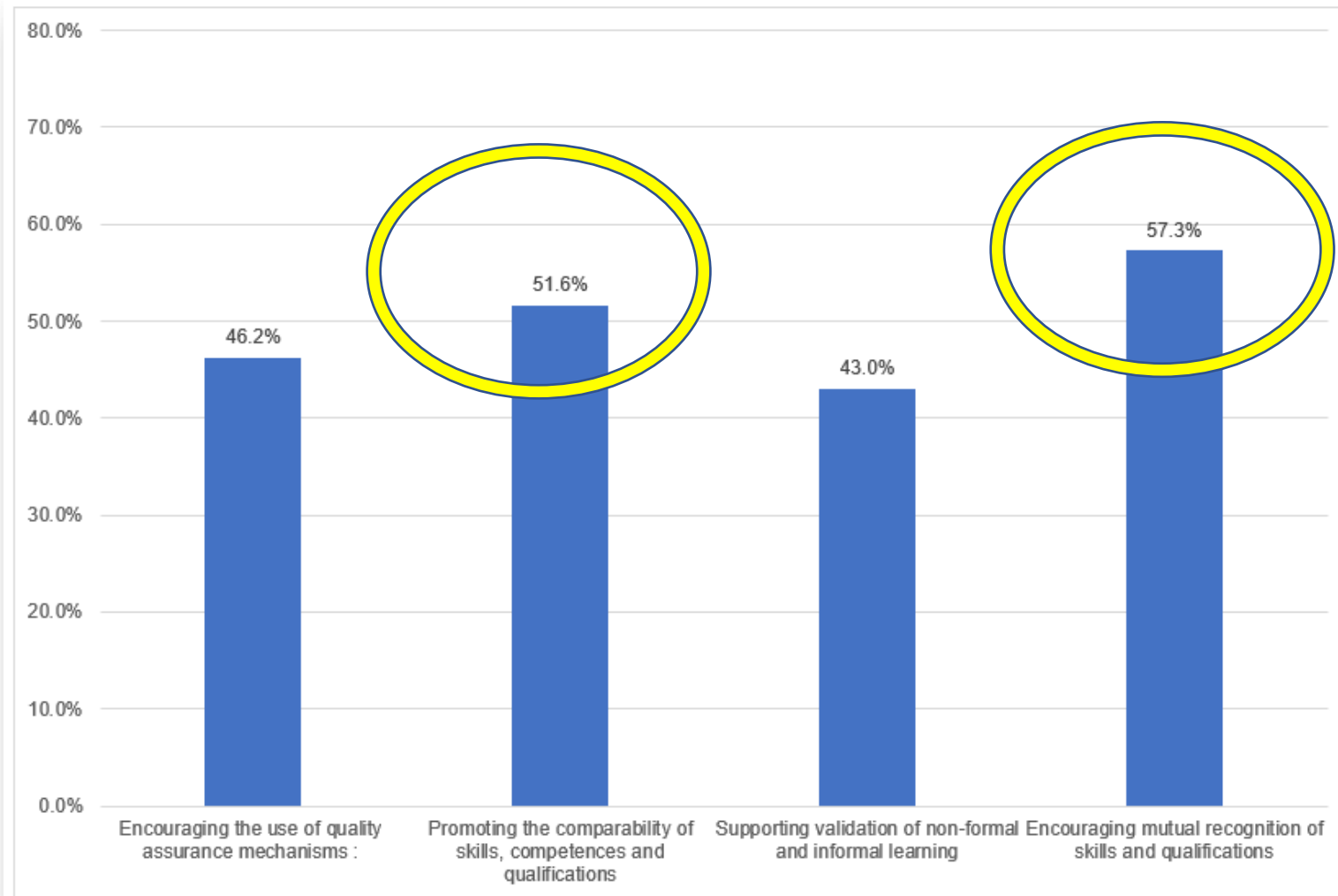
Interviewees: ECVET principles “live” in microcredentials

→ “units of learning outcomes” that can be combined into larger credentials.

Links between credits and other initiatives

- **Credits in Higher Education (ECTS)** strong links with **quality assurance in HE**, **diploma supplements** and **qualifications frameworks** → stronger with QF-EHEA than with the EQF
- In several countries, credits are awarded based on **validation**, but much **room for improvement**.
- **Credit in VET (ECVTE)** → Designed to work coherently with **quality assurance in VET** and **EQF** and encourage the use **validation** to give people access to formal learning programmes in VET;
→ National level: limited implementation of ECVET hindered practical synergies.
- Strong links between **credits in HE** and initiatives on **academic recognition of qualifications** (Lisbon Recognition Convention and the 2018 Recommendation on the mutual recognition of qualifications) and weaker links with **Directive on Professional qualifications** (duration of a programme *may be* expressed in ECTS).
- **Recommendation on automatic recognition** refers to ECVET and its tools (e.g. Learning Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding).

Interconnections national initiative on **credits** and other areas - Survey insights



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Initiatives on comparability across systems

Qualifications frameworks: EQF and QF-EHEA

- They differ in their **sectoral focus but strong links**
 - EQF levels are **compatible** with cycles of the QH-EHEA
 - **Cooperation** from early developments to present: referencing process and principles, governance, etc.
 - At national level: 1 joint report.

Europass diploma supplement (HE) and certificate supplements (VET)

- Diploma supplements reference to QF-EHEA and/or EQF
- Certificate supplements reference EQF level
- EQF recommendation refers to both

ESCO → potential role to support comparison of qualifications. Far from perfect, but only tool for digitally connect information and build interoperable systems

Europass portal → includes information on all the above developments (and gives access to qualifications) as well as information on validation and recognition

Main policy developments considered

- 2008 and 2017: European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**
- 2005: Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)**
- 2004 and 2020: Europass** (Diploma supplement*, Certificate supplement, and Europass portal);
- 2017 and 2022: The multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, and Occupations (ESCO)**

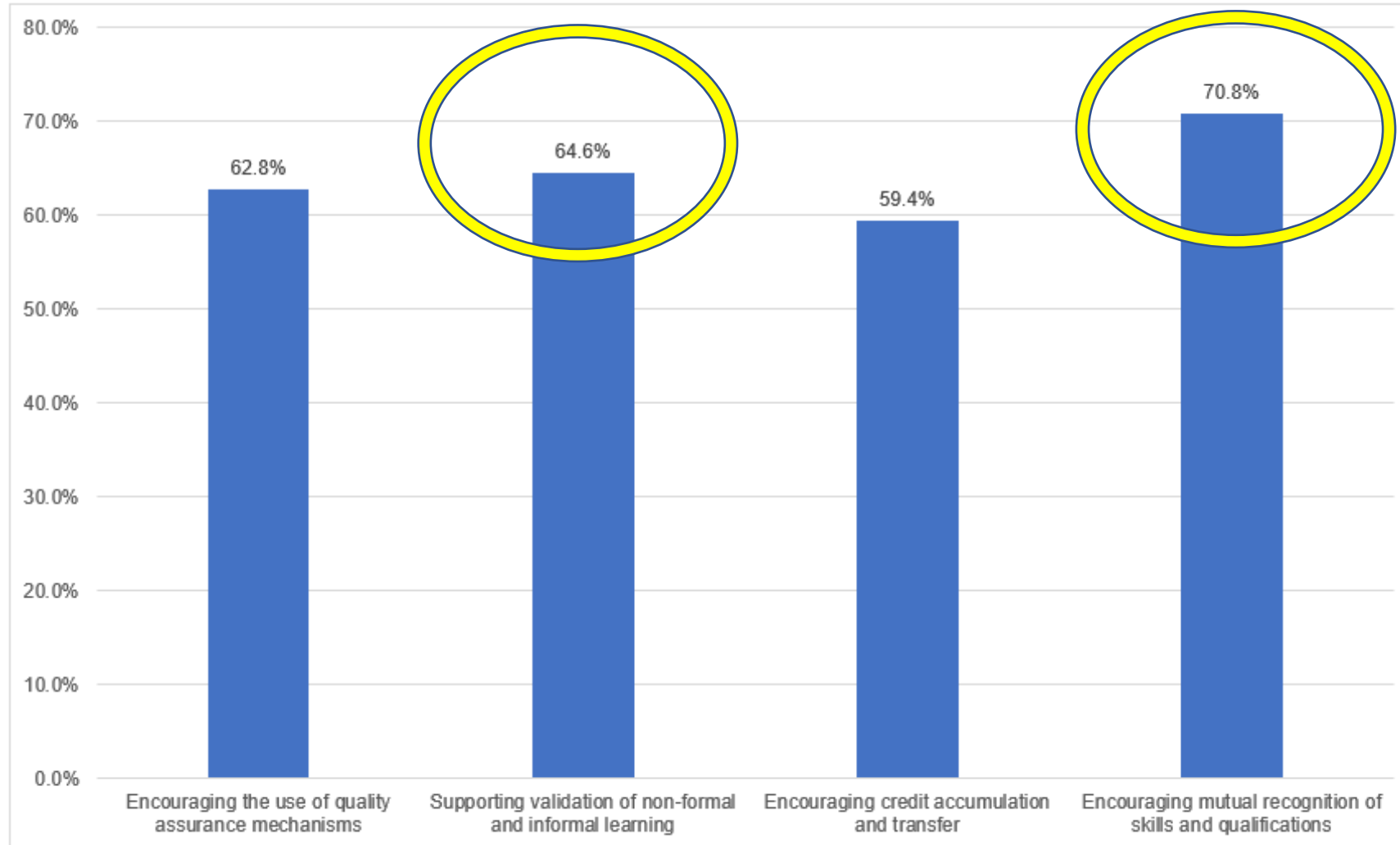
*Diploma supplement was jointly developed by the Council of Europe, European Commission, and UNESCO between 1996 and 1998.

Links between qualifications frameworks and other initiatives

Initiatives on qualifications frameworks → EQF and QF-EHEA

- Both **strong links** with **quality assurance** and **credits** developments:
 - QF-EHEA strong links with quality assurance in HE (ESG) and credits in HE (ECTS)
 - EQF principles on quality assurance compatible with quality assurance in HE and VET (ESG and EQAVET) and principles on credits compatible with credits in HE and VET (ECTS and ECVET)
- Both give **relevance** to **validation** of non-formal and informal learning
 - Strong links with the EQF as to promote validation is one of **its main objectives** and because of the **governance** structure (EQF advisory Group responsible for implementation validation)
- **Links** with initiatives on **recognition** of qualifications
 - Qualifications frameworks important tools for supporting academic recognition
 - Directive on professional qualifications a (weak) reference to the EQF

Interconnections between national initiative on **comparability of skills and qualifications** and other areas – survey insights



Original question: In your opinion, in your country to what extent are the national initiatives in the considered policy areas interlinked and mutually reinforcing each other?

N = 97

Graph: respondents selecting high-medium



Validation of non-formal and informal learning across systems

Main policy developments considered

2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (**VNFIL**)

European **Guidelines** for validating non-formal and informal learning

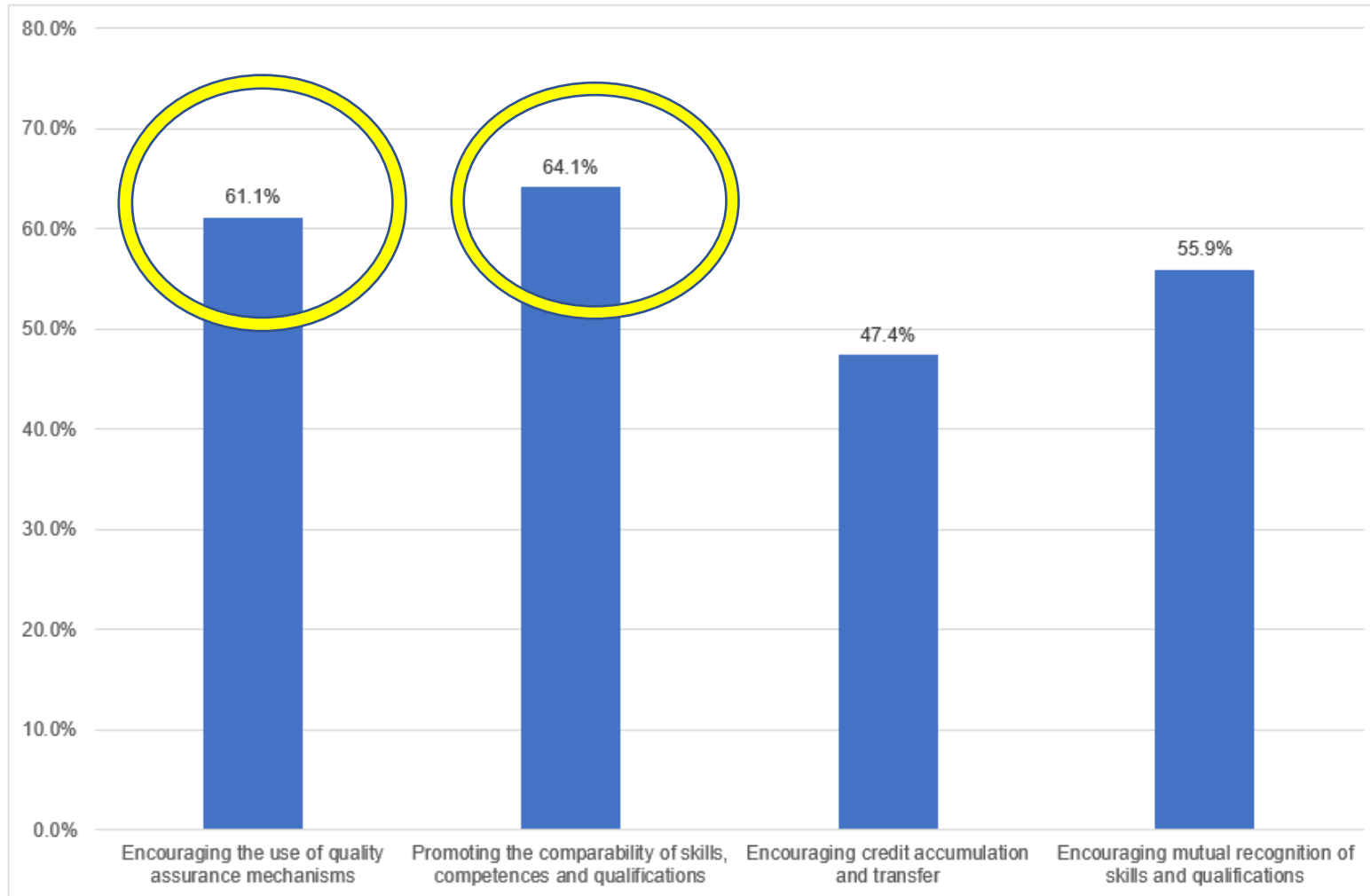
European **Inventory** on Validation of non-formal and informal learning

- At EU level validation is not associated to a specific sector
→ **cross-sectorial** initiative
- Guidelines and inventory important tools supporting validation **implementation and monitoring**
- At national level: the recommendation is supporting consistent implementation but there is **fragmentation**:
 - Different legal and policy frameworks (low coherence)
 - Multiple actors and stakeholders
 - Convergence in definitions (guided by the 2012 recommendation and the 4 stages); but different terminology and understanding still exist

Links between validation of non-formal and informal learning and other initiatives

- **Quality assurance** initiatives in HE and VET **give relevance** to validation; but not a priority.
- **Credits** in HE and VET should be awarded also based on validation of non-formal and informal learning; facilitating transfer across learning contexts. **At national level:** in many countries this happens, although mainly in HE (but some resistance). **Scope for better and closer links.**
- **Strong links** with **qualifications frameworks** → Important links with EQF objectives, implementation and governance. **At national level:** implementation of **validation is often linked to** the development of national **qualifications frameworks** (NQFs) which act as important reference point
- **Diploma supplements** refer to learning acquired “outside university” and **certificate supplement** invites to provide information on how the qualification is acquired.
- Initiatives on **recognition**, **no explicit links** with recommendation on validation; **but learning taking place outside formal systems** (“non-traditional qualifications” “professional experience”) considered.

Interconnections national initiative on validation of non-formal and informal learning and other areas – survey insights



Original question: In your opinion, in your country to what extent are the national initiatives in the considered policy areas interlinked and mutually reinforcing each other?
N = 97
Graph: respondents selecting high-medium



Initiatives on recognition of qualifications

Analysed initiatives have:

- **Different purposes** (professional /academic/further learning purpose)
- **Different legal status** (legally and non legally binding)
- **Different approaches:**
 - Directive PQ → for automatic recognition focus on harmonised training requirements and duration and less focus on learning outcomes
 - Recommendation AR and LRC implementation: learning outcomes key component

Different degrees of synergy:

- The Recommendation AR acknowledges the LRC while it has no links with the Directive PQ (*“this Recommendation is without prejudice to...”*)
- Directive PQ does not refer to the LRC.
- ENIC-NARIC (implementing the LRC) often provide information or are in charge of recognising professional qualifications

Main policy developments

- 1997:** Lisbon Recognition Convention (**LRC**) on recognition of academic qualifications;
- 2005 and 2013:** Directive on Professional Qualifications (**DPQ**)
- 2018** Recommendation promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad. (**Recommendation AR**)

Links between initiatives on recognition and other initiatives

Recommendation on automatic recognition (AR) and implementation of the LRC have links with :

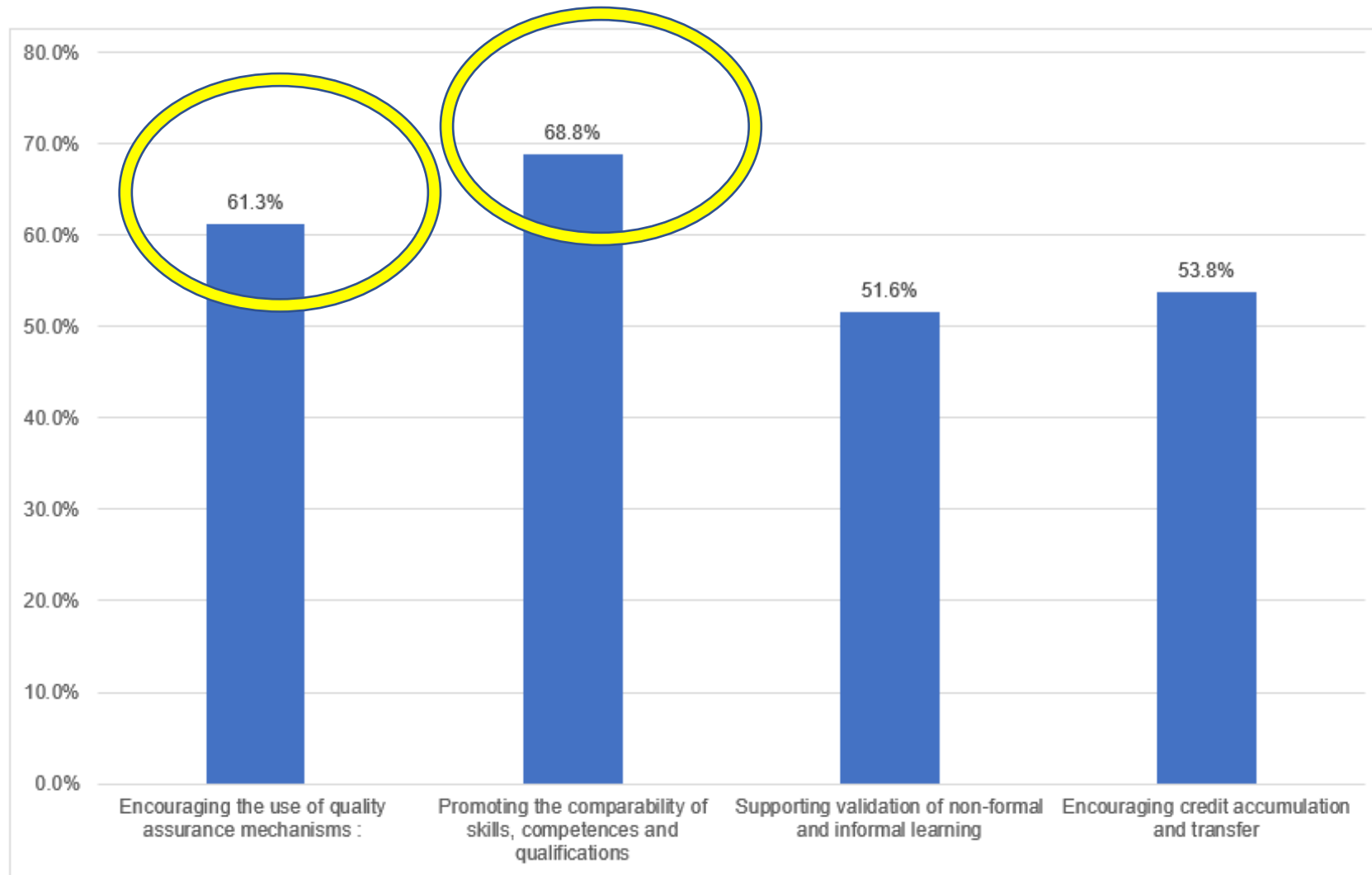
- **Qualifications frameworks**
 - Subsidiary text to the LRC convention (2013) “Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications”.
- **Credits in HE** and the Recommendation AR also refer to **credit systems in VET**
- **Quality assurance in HE** and the Recommendation AR also refers to **quality assurance in VET**
- **Diploma supplements** and the Recommendation AR also refers to **certificate supplements**
- **Validation** → LRC requires to consider for access to HE also “non-traditional” qualifications. The Recommendation AR invites to “explore good practices on recognition of prior learning”.

Directive on professional qualifications:

- Limited links with EQF → It appears in the context of ‘common training frameworks’ only
- Limited links with ECST → duration of a programme *may be* expressed in ECTS
- Some links with validation non-formal and informal learning → professional experience is considered, including in the absence of a qualification.



Interconnections national initiative on recognition of skills and qualifications and other areas – survey insights



Original question: In your opinion, in your country to what extent are the national initiatives in the considered policy areas interlinked and mutually reinforcing each other?
N = 97
Graph: respondents selecting high-medium

Recognition of VET qualifications?

Recognition of VET qualifications?

Lisbon Recognition Convention

- It covers those qualifications that give access to HE (potentially also VET qualifications)
- It covers programmes that have a professional orientation (e.g. Universities of applied science)
- In some countries LRC principles used for supporting recognition of VET EQF levels 3-5 (e.g. SE)

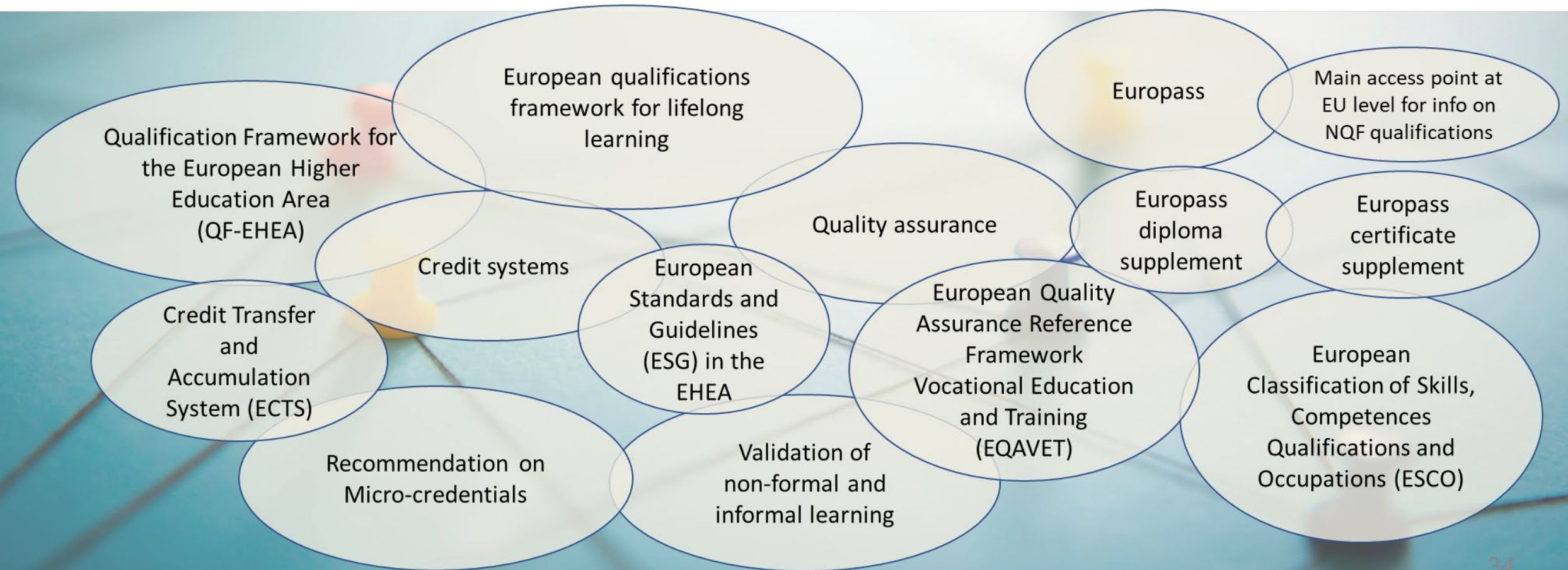
Directive on Professional Qualifications

- Closely linked to “VET qualifications” but only if these give access to regulated professions.

Recommendation on automatic recognition

- It covers “upper secondary education and training qualifications” including VET qualifications

The analysed initiatives support recognition of skills and qualifications by enhancing their **transparency**, supporting the use of learning outcomes, improving their **comparability** and fostering **trust**.



Main considerations on relationships

- **First effort** to look at policy in a systematic way across sectors
- Most initiatives **underpinned by the importance of learning outcomes**
- Overall, **fairly good connection** among policy initiatives. Many share aims and objectives, with concepts that integrate and align.
- It is **not always easy to create a coherent policy framework** and **even more difficult** promote synergies during **development and implementation.**
- Sustained **cooperation among stakeholders groups** responsible for initiatives are essential for effective synergies. Some show strong collaboration, in other cooperation can be enhanced.
- As initiatives progress, they can move away from their “internal focus” and aim for **improved links with other initiatives**
- There are cross-sectorial initiatives that can serve as platforms for cooperation.
- The EQF stands out as the tool with the most extensive connections across policy areas and sectors

The background features a complex network of thin, light-colored lines connecting various nodes. Some nodes are highlighted with a soft, glowing effect. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, typical of a corporate or technological presentation.

IMPACT

- No **linear path towards change**. Initiatives interact and are not the only factor influencing change.
- In practices, some **processes run in parallel** (sectorial or thematic focus); while they impact their respective sectors, it remains unclear to what extent they promote permeability between sectors, lifelong learning and mobility for all.
- **Mobilisation** of policymakers, stakeholders, institutions, practitioners and local actors **needed** to make the necessary changes.
- Links with **wider skills and lifelong learning strategies** important for impact and ensuring **adaptability** with evolving contexts.
- National reforms and changes unfold gradually and often **require time to yield visible results**.

Preliminary considerations on impact

Contribution/impact of policy developments analysed

- ✓ **Quality assurance** initiatives had an impact on different sectors, increasing **trust** on systems and on the content of qualifications
- ✓ Development of “**comprehensive**” **national qualifications framework**, opening to different types of qualifications with connection to validation of non-formal and informal learning supporting visibility of learning taking place outside formal systems. Impact on the descriptions and transparency of qualifications (use of learning outcomes-based level descriptors)
- ✓ **Diploma and certificate supplements** are used to improve the visibility and transparency of learning, to support recognition processes and Europass portal to access information.
- ✓ **Credits** are used in HE and support transferability (between HEI); ECVET had an impact in promoting the use of learning outcomes and modularisation of qualifications, supporting transferability.
- ✓ Despite uneven developments, countries are establishing validation arrangements, and more **people have access to validation**, making “invisible learning” visible.
- ✓ **Recognition** important initiatives, including legally binding, with impact on mobility but **complex landscape** and uneven implementation

Combined impact/contribution of EU policy initiatives

- Most initiatives: voluntary tools and process. Nevertheless, significant commitment and resulting changes depict a **success story in EU cooperation**.
- Important role of programmes, projects, working groups to support implementation and a “bottom up” approach and promote synergies.
- For some countries, EU initiatives acted as a **catalyst for policy changes and reforms** (national developments also influenced EU initiatives).
- Impact of EU initiatives can also consist in **creating a favourable environment** for the implementation of these policies
- Encouraged and sustained discussions and attention (at EU and national level) on the need to **enhance system’s flexibility**
- Promoted a **convergence process and commitment** to the transparency, comparability and recognition of qualifications
- Emphasised and encouraged the use of a **learning outcomes approach** in different sectors of education and training (as well as in non-formal learning)

NEXT STEPS

- Further explore **impact** of European and national policy developments **on individuals**
- Building on past trends develop alternative **policy scenarios towards 2040** to inform policy discussion
- 21st February 2024 → **Online workshop** “Making progression in learning a reality - Learners in the spotlight” <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events/making-progression-learning-reality-learners-spotlight>



Thank you

For further information:

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Project page

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/transparency-and-transferability-learning-outcomes>