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A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu>).

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	National context	1
2.1.	Policy context	1
2.2.	NQF legal basis	2
3.	NQF objectives	3
4.	Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications	3
4.1.	NQF structure and level descriptors.....	3
4.2.	NQF scope and coverage	4
4.3.	Use of learning outcomes	7
4.4.	Quality assurance arrangements	8
5.	Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	9
6.	Recognition and validation of prior learning.....	10
6.1.	Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways.....	10
6.2.	Credit systems.....	11
6.3.	Recognition of foreign qualifications	11
7.	NQF implementation and impact.....	12
7.1.	Stage of implementation	12
7.2.	Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF.....	12
7.3.	Indicating EQF/NQF levels	12
7.4.	NQF dissemination	13
7.5.	Qualifications databases and registers	13
7.6.	Awareness and use of the NQF.....	14
7.7.	Monitoring and evaluating the NQF	15
7.8.	Impact of the NQF	16
8.	Referencing to the EQF	17
9.	Reflections and plans.....	17
	Acronyms.....	18
	References.....	19
	Web pages and databases.....	19

1. Introduction

Cedefop's work on qualifications frameworks dates back to 2003. The Centre has contributed to the conceptual development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and has supported its further implementation, working alongside with the of national authorities and stakeholders to introduce and develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). This report is part of the European inventory of NQFs, which systematically maps and analyses NQF developments in countries participating in the EQF process. The inventory is updated biennially in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation. The report provides a detailed description of the structure of the NQF of the Estonian qualifications framework (EstQF) (*Eesti Kvalifikatsiooniraamistik EKR*) and its institutional arrangements. It also examines the framework's implementation and its impact on broader policy areas, focusing on key developments since 2022.

The EstQF was introduced in 2008 with an eight-level framework, covering all national qualifications awarded both within and outside formal education and training. It is operational and integrates four sub-frameworks on higher education, vocational education and training (VET), general education and professional qualifications ⁽¹⁾. The referencing of the EstQF to the EQF and self-certification against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) were endorsed in a joint report by the EQF Advisory Group in 2011. The referencing report was updated in 2016.

2. National context

2.1. Policy context

In 2023, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) remained at 6.3% (the same as in 2020), higher than the EU-27 average of 4.7% ⁽²⁾. The tertiary education attainment rate (age 25–34) was 43.5%, slightly above the EU-27 average of 43.1% ⁽³⁾. Participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) was 38.7% (40.3% in 2021),

⁽¹⁾ Professional qualifications are those associated with a trade, occupation or profession, usually resulting from work-based learning, in-service training and adult education.

⁽²⁾ More information at Eurostat [[gov_10a_exp](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

⁽³⁾ More information at Eurostat [[edat_ifs_9912](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

below the EU average of 49.1% ⁽⁴⁾. The employment rate for VET graduates was 84.6%, surpassing the EU average of 81.0% (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024). Participation in early childhood education in 2022 was 91.9% ⁽⁵⁾, just below the EU average of 93.1%. In 2023, the share of early leavers from education and training (aged 18–24) was 9.7%, similar to the EU average of 9.5% ⁽⁶⁾. Adult participation in learning increased to 23.2 % in 2023 (21.2% in 2022), significantly higher than the EU average of 12.8% ⁽⁷⁾.

EstQF developments cover all education and training sectors, including general, vocational and higher education, along with professional qualifications. The overall aim of strategic documents and laws is to ensure the consistent development of sectors and a smooth transition between them. According to the [Education strategy 2021-2035](#), the EstQF should support flexible learning and career pathways for all learners, through the implementation of learning-outcome-based education and training. The [reform of the professional qualifications system](#) has reached a new phase with the publication of the document ‘[Intention to Develop a Draft Act to Amend the Professions Act](#)’. This document forms the basis for advancing towards a skills-based professional qualifications system. The primary objective of the reform is to create a single, coherent, and functional digital ecosystem by integrating [OSKA](#) labour market forecasting, the Skills Catalogue, the digital service platform 'Skills Compass', and the professional qualifications system ⁽⁸⁾. The review of the EstQF will be a central part of the reform, as skills profiles will be linked to EstQF levels. They will also be used to develop curricula leading to microcredentials (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

2.2. NQF legal basis

The EstQF was adopted in 2008 through the [Professional Qualifications Act](#) (with subsequent amendments). The Act provides the basis for the comprehensive eight-level framework and for the organisation of the professional qualifications system; it regulates the activities of awarding authorities and sectoral councils, the adoption of professional qualification standards and the award of professional qualifications. The framework also forms part of the legislation and regulatory documents of the education and training system and the system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

⁽⁴⁾ More information at Eurostat [[educ_uoe_enra13](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

⁽⁵⁾ More information at Eurostat [[educ_uoe_enra21](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

⁽⁶⁾ More information at Eurostat [[edat_ifse_14](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

⁽⁷⁾ More information at Eurostat [[sdg_04_60](#)], accessed 1.4.2025.

⁽⁸⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

The education ministry (Ministry of Education and Research) is preparing amendments to the Primary and Upper Secondary School Act, the Vocational Education Institution Act and the secondary education standard, aiming to integrate general and vocational education further and deepen the implementation of outcome-based learning. These amendments will contribute to the better implementation of the EstQF (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). The [higher education standard](#) have entered into force in 2024, focusing on developing and changing learning outcomes and their descriptions. Also, the [national curriculum for vocational secondary education](#) entered into force in 2025, as did the [Adult Education Act](#), with significant changes from the perspective of EstQF implementation ⁽⁹⁾.

3. NQF objectives

The policy objectives relating to the EstQF include:

- (a) improving links between education/training and the labour market;
- (b) increasing the consistency of the education offer and the qualification system;
- (c) enhancing the transparency and understanding of qualifications within Estonia and abroad;
- (d) introducing common quality assurance criteria;
- (e) supporting the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (f) monitoring supply and demand for learning (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020; 2022).

4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The EstQF has eight qualification levels. Its level descriptors are similar to those of the EQF, and are defined in terms of learning outcomes, as knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills (cognitive – use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking; and practical – manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and degree of responsibility and autonomy. More detailed descriptors have been developed in the four sub-frameworks for general education, initial vocational education, higher education and professional qualifications, as defined

⁽⁹⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

in the corresponding national educational standards underpinning quality assurance activities.

4.2. NQF scope and coverage

The framework includes all national qualifications, which should be defined in learning-outcome-based qualification standards (curricula or professional standards) awarded within or outside formal education and training by nationally accredited institutions. There are two main types of levelled qualifications:

- (a) formal education qualifications, awarded after the completion of programmes at all levels and in all sectors (general, vocational and higher education);
- (b) professional qualifications ⁽¹⁰⁾, leading to a professional certificate testifying that the required knowledge, skills and competences for working in a specific occupation or profession have been achieved.

The qualifications are included in two interconnected registers, one for all formal education qualifications and one for the [professional qualifications](#) (see Section 7.5). Qualifications in sub-frameworks are described in the corresponding national education standards, which are based on learning outcomes:

- (a) [national curriculum](#) for basic schools, [simplified national curriculum](#) for basic schools and [national curriculum](#) for upper secondary schools;
- (b) [standard of VET](#);
- (c) [standard of higher education](#) ⁽¹¹⁾;
- (d) [professional qualifications act](#).

The EstQF is well established, especially the sub-frameworks for VET, higher education and professional qualifications. General education is formally connected to the overarching framework through relevant State programmes, but common awareness about learning outcomes and qualification levels is rather weak in this subsystem. Adult training courses have not been assigned to NQF levels and are not included in a register.

The EstQF is open to and already includes professional qualifications, awarded outside formal education subsystems; they have been part of the framework since 2018 through the Professional Qualifications Act. In the national context, alternative terms such as certificates, licences, and certifications are used for these qualifications, which are overseen by different regulatory authorities.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Professional qualifications are assigned to levels 2 to 8 in the EstQF (Estonian Qualifications Authority, 2016).

⁽¹¹⁾ In the sub-framework for higher education, general descriptors follow the logic of the Dublin descriptors but are adjusted to national needs.

The framework is also open to and includes partial qualifications and modules or units of learning outcomes. While the framework is open to microcredentials, they are not yet included. However, there are plans to integrate them during the upcoming update of the Referencing Report, following the adoption of the Adult Education Act and the formation of the EQF Steering Committee. In July 2024, amendments to the Adult Education Act were adopted to regulate micro-qualifications (microcredentials). A significant development in the Adult Education Act is the introduction of a structured system for awarding micro-qualifications. Training for micro-qualifications can be delivered by three types of institutions: higher education or vocational education institutions that already have the right to provide education in a particular field; those with an activity licence in a field but do not have the right to provide education; and other licensed continuing education institutions. Each micro-qualification programme must span between 5 and 30 ECTS credits. Upon successful completion, learners receive a micro-qualification certificate, issued in line with national standards as defined in the Act. These certificates serve a dual purpose: they can either stand alone as proof of specific competences or be combined and accumulated to contribute toward a full qualification or even a vocational qualification certificate in formal education. Higher and vocational education institutions can also recognise prior learning and work experience in awarding these micro-qualifications, aligning with the principles set out in the Higher Education Act and the Vocational Education Institutions Act ⁽¹²⁾.

In contrast, international qualifications are neither included nor planned for inclusion in the EstQF. These qualifications pose challenges due to the lack of a national institution for verification. The decision on their future consideration depends on the position of the European Commission (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Table 1. **Estonian national qualifications framework (EstQF)**

EstQF level	Qualification awarded in formal education	Professional groups and professional qualifications	EQF level
8	Doctoral degree (<i>Doktorikraad</i>)	Level 8 professional qualification – senior specialists, top managers, e.g. chartered engineer, principal architect	8
7	Master degree (<i>Magistrikraad</i>)	Level 7 professional qualification – specialists, managers, e.g. diploma engineer, diploma architect	7

⁽¹²⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

EstQF level	Qualification awarded in formal education	Professional groups and professional qualifications	EQF level
6	Bachelor degree (<i>Bakalaureusekraad</i>) Diploma of professional higher education (<i>Rakenduskõrgharidusõppe diplom</i>)	Level 6 professional qualification – specialists, supervisors, e.g. energy auditor, career counsellor	6
5	VET certificate, level 5 (5. <i>taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 5 professional qualification – technicians and craft masters, frontline managers, clerical workers, e.g. master carpenter, construction site manager, master chef	5
4	Upper secondary general education certificate (<i>Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus</i>) Upper secondary VET certificate (<i>Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus</i>) VET certificate, level 4 (4. <i>taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 4 professional qualification – skilled workers, machine operators, service and sales workers, clerical support workers, e.g. CNC (computer numerical control) milling machine operator, carpenter, florist	4
3	VET qualification certificate, level 3 (3. <i>taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 3 professional qualification – skilled workers, machine operators, service and sales workers, clerical support workers, e.g. cleaner, electronic equipment assembler, facility maintenance technician	3
2	Basic education certificate (<i>Põhikooli lõputunnistus</i>) Basic education certificate based on simplified national curriculum for basic schools (<i>Põhikooli lihtsustatud riikliku õppekava lõputunnistus</i>) VET certificate, level 2 (without basic education requirement) (2. <i>taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 2 professional qualification – elementary workers, e.g. cook's assistant, cleaner's assistant	2
1	Basic education certificate based on simplified national curriculum for basic schools (for students with special educational needs) (<i>Põhikooli lihtsustatud riikliku õppekava toimetulekuõppe tunnistus</i>)		1

Source: European Commission & Cedefop (2024).

4.3. Use of learning outcomes

The introduction of the learning-outcomes approach has been an important part of the national reform programme for general education, VET, and higher education. There is also an increased focus on the recognition of prior learning. Higher and vocational education are more advanced in implementing the learning outcomes approach. Employers play an active and constructive role ⁽¹³⁾. The 2021–2035 education strategy further supports the use of the learning outcomes approach, as its general objective is to ease the transition between education levels and sectors.

For general education, which includes elementary, basic, and secondary levels, the learning outcomes are detailed in the national curricula. The current national curricula in general education were introduced in 2011, with the last amendment in 2020. They set out goals and objectives, expected learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and requirements for the learning and teaching environment, graduation and school curriculum. General education programmes should align with the objectives and learning outcomes of the national curricula.

The learning outcomes of VET programmes (EstQF levels 2 to 5) are described in the vocational education standard. The standard defines the requirements for national and school curricula, including the objectives, expected learning outcomes, volumes of study and graduation requirements for initial and continuing VET programmes, along with the requirements for pedagogical professionals. Learning outcomes are defined both as occupation-specific knowledge and skills, and as transversal skills: communication; learning, social and entrepreneurial skills; self-awareness; independence and responsibility. Both national and school VET curricula have been reformed since 2013 ⁽¹⁴⁾. In 2019, the VET standard was amended, changing school-leaving conditions by emphasising achieved learning outcomes. The national curricula for vocational secondary education were added as a third level and include detailed learning outcomes, which are further regulated by ministerial regulations (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

In 2015, the Adult Education Act introduced the learning outcomes approach to this sector. A new continuing education standard was introduced, specifying quality criteria for adult education curricula (Cedefop, 2020).

Since 2009, learning-outcome-based study programmes have been implemented in higher education. The standard of higher education refers to

⁽¹³⁾ In VET, employers are involved in developing professional standards, which serve as the basis for curriculum development; in higher education, they directly participate in curriculum development (Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority).

⁽¹⁴⁾ VET curricula [database](#).

learning outcomes at the basic level (outcomes that any graduate must achieve); the achievement of learning outcomes above the minimum level is differentiated by grading.

Professional qualification standards describe expected competences in terms of learning outcomes (performance indicators and knowledge). They are the basis for national VET curricula, higher education curricula and other training programmes, and for the assessment of individuals' competences. The Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) is responsible for implementing the quality assurance system in the professional qualifications system.

4.4. Quality assurance arrangements

In higher education, there are two quality assurance bodies: the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) and the Quality Assessment of Study Programme Groups, which offer recommendations to institutions on internal evaluation and self-development. Only government-recognised institutions can offer programmes leading to EstQF-levelled qualifications. To gain recognition, institutions should also prove that the learning outcomes of the programmes correspond to the proposed EstQF level. All formal education programmes and certificates, including those related to professional qualifications, must indicate a qualifications framework level and include learning outcomes or performance criteria that align with that level (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The external quality assurance of VET is regulated by the vocational educational institutions act. The quality assurance activities are delegated to the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA). The external quality assessment of study programmes in VET and higher education assesses whether the intended learning outcomes correspond to the EstQF/EQF level or the respective professional qualification standard. External quality assurance in general education is coordinated by the external evaluation department of the education ministry.

In the professional qualifications system, the sector skills councils are responsible for ensuring that each professional qualification standard added to the EstQF is assigned the correct level, i.e. the competences correspond to the EstQF level description. The councils then submit a proposal to the body of chairmen of sectoral councils for approval of the relevant EstQF level. They also supervise awarding bodies, assessing whether they comply with all quality requirements. The assessment criteria for awarding professional qualifications are described in the evaluation standards; they should align with the EstQF level descriptors (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The education ministry and the Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) are the main bodies in charge of developing and implementing the EstQF. The ministry has overall responsibility for developing and overseeing the framework, while the EstQF secretariat, responsible for the day-to-day running of the framework, operates under the Estonian Qualifications Authority (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). The authority was set up in 2001 to develop a competence-based professional qualifications system, operating in parallel with the formal education system under the education ministry. In 2010, the authority was [nominated as the EQF national coordination point](#) (EQF NCP). The EQF NCP is staffed by five part-time employees (two full-time equivalents) and financed from the State budget and the EQF NCP grant. Since 2022, a department of skills and qualifications has been set up in the education ministry with 3.5 full-time-equivalent positions; its responsibilities include developing the EstQF and recognising foreign qualifications.

The Estonian Qualifications Authority is tasked with:

- (a) organising the referencing of the EstQF to EQF levels, ensuring the involvement of stakeholders and the transparency of the process;
- (b) implementing the EU principles of quality referencing;
- (c) informing stakeholders and the public about EstQF-related developments;
- (d) participating in the activities of the EQF NCP's network.

The EQF NCP also cooperates with other institutions, disseminates information, and provides guidance and advice on the application of the framework to various stakeholders. It usually cooperates with those participating in the professional qualifications system: the sectoral councils, professional examination committees, experts and working groups developing professional qualification standards. The EQF NCP also cooperates with education institutions in developing curricula and with awarding bodies in developing assessment standards (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). The authority coordinates the 14 sectoral councils and provides technical support to the board of chairs of these councils. Typically, the sectoral councils consist of representatives of employers, employees and professional associations in the sector; education and training institutions; and the ministries responsible. The councils prepare, amend, renew and approve professional standards, and decide on the levelling of professional qualifications to the EstQF. The board of chairs of the sectoral professional councils coordinates cross-sectoral cooperation.

Stakeholders can approach the EQF NCP through the supervisory board of the qualifications authority, while the most actively engaged stakeholder, as a country representative on Europass and EQF advisory groups, is the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. A steering committee, ensuring the involvement of all key stakeholders ⁽¹⁵⁾, was set up to support the referencing of the EstQF to the EQF and its implementation. It will be reconvened, under the Estonian Qualifications Authority, to review the upcoming referencing report (see Chapter 8) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

6.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

Validation practices are sector specific and present in all sectors but are more developed in formal education. There are validation arrangements for all qualification types at all EstQF levels that can lead to a partial or full qualification, give credits/exemptions towards a qualification, or provide access to programmes leading to a qualification. At all levels and for all types of qualification, it is possible for a qualification to be awarded solely through validation arrangements (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

One objective of the EstQF is to support validation. The curricula of all levelled qualifications and the relevant regulations in each subsystem enable education providers to recognise non-formal and informal learning. One of the main principles of validation regulations and procedures is the recognition of achieved learning outcomes against a specific curriculum or occupational standard at a certain EstQF level (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

Since 2009, the [Universities Act](#) and the [Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act](#) have enabled the accreditation of prior and experiential learning in higher education curricula. However, institutions cannot award entire diplomas or certificates based on prior and experiential learning. In practice, this means that the whole curriculum may be recognised based on prior learning, except for the thesis or final examination. Subjects and modules completed through validation

⁽¹⁵⁾ The committee included representatives of ministries, the State Chancellery, trade unions, the employers' confederation, learners' unions, the Chamber of Commerce and industry, the Qualifications Authority, the Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the ENIC-NARIC centre.

must be marked as ‘recognised on the basis of prior learning’ in the diploma supplement.

In VET, prior learning may be recognised to fulfil admission requirements, to complete the curriculum except for the final examination, and to recognise a previously passed vocational examination. In VET, there has been a considerable increase in the recognition of previous work experience, supported by the transition to outcome-based learning (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

In general education, validation is possible, but processes and practices have not been clearly defined. Secondary education curricula for initial education and adult education are the same; evaluating prior knowledge can reduce the study duration for adults.

Although the validation of non-formal and informal learning against occupational standards is not regulated by law, in principle, full professional qualifications can be awarded through such a process. The procedure includes assessing preconditions such as education, evaluating competences from diverse learning settings, and exempting previously assessed skills during reapplications (Teppo et al., 2024).

6.2. Credit systems

A credit point system that conforms to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System is used in higher education, and a credit point system is used in VET.

6.3. Recognition of foreign qualifications

Academic and professional recognition of foreign qualifications is conducted based on the [Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications Act](#) and carried out by the ENIC-NARIC Centre, which coordinates the work of the competent authorities. The Estonian Qualifications Authority is the contact point for any questions regarding qualifications, recognition, permission to work and licensing (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020). Regarding the comparability of the EstQF with frameworks from third countries, work has been done on analysing the correspondence of the qualifications held by Ukrainian refugees. More broadly, ways to compare qualifications from countries that do not participate in the EQF process have been analysed. In general, recognition authorities consider the EstQF a helpful tool, but many credentials still require separate assessment with additional compliance details (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

7. NQF implementation and impact

7.1. Stage of implementation

The Estonian NQF has reached the operational stage.

7.2. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

In Estonia, qualifications are included in the EstQF through distinct procedures depending on the type of qualification—whether it falls under formal education or the professional qualifications system.

For formal education qualifications, the process is overseen by the education ministry. When a new curriculum is developed, it is submitted to the ministry, where the Level Committee assesses its compliance with the expected EstQF level. This assessment focuses primarily on the alignment of learning outcomes with the relevant educational standards. These standards vary by level and type of education: learning outcomes in general education (elementary, basic, and secondary) are outlined in national curricula; in vocational education, they are set in the [Standard of Vocational Education](#); and at the higher education level, they are governed by the Higher Education Standard. For vocational secondary education, there is an additional regulatory layer—national curricula containing detailed learning outcomes which are approved by ministerial regulation. These different education sub-frameworks have been developed independently and are maintained under separate sets of regulations at the government level.

In contrast, professional qualifications follow a different procedure. The procedure is coordinated through the [professional qualifications system](#) and is regulated by sectoral bodies. [Sector-specific councils](#) develop the qualifications based on the needs of the labour market, using vocational standards that define the required competences for each occupation. The Council of Sectoral Councils Chairpersons is responsible for reviewing and approving the qualifications, ensuring that they align with the appropriate EstQF level. This approach allows for flexibility and responsiveness to evolving industry requirements, while maintaining a structured alignment with national qualification levels (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

7.3. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

EstQF/EQF levels are indicated on all levelled qualifications. Indicating EstQF/EQF levels on Europass certificate supplements and diploma supplements, is also general practice for all EstQF qualifications (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). The levels are indicated in the [Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem](#) (Estonian

education infosystem – EHIS) database and the professional qualifications register (see Section 7.5) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

7.4. NQF dissemination

The NCP develops a communication plan, which is updated every six months. The main target group consists of learners and young employees who need support in developing a curriculum vitae and describing their knowledge and skills. The main channels are social media (Facebook, [YouTube](#)), digital media (videos) and online informational material on the [website](#) of the Estonian Qualifications Authority, for example on [level descriptors](#). The use of the framework is also promoted and supported through a variety of [materials](#) and [tools](#) on the Europass portal, and by [infographics](#), articles on [Europass](#), [the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe](#) and the [Authority's](#) websites, [handbooks](#) and leaflets (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). Dissemination and information events are organised annually to share information with education providers, policymakers and employer and employee organisations (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020).

7.5. Qualifications databases and registers

Two interconnected qualifications registers are in use, covering all levelled qualifications. The [Estonian education infosystem \(EHIS\)](#) includes all formal education qualifications. The [Professional qualifications register](#) covers all professional qualifications and also provides information in English. The coverage changes daily; in September 2024, the EHIS included 687 higher education qualifications, 1 379 vocational qualifications and 8 018 valid curricula, while the professional qualifications register contained 537 valid professional qualification standards. Both registers provide information on the field of study of qualifications, the EstQF/EQF levels, a description of the learning outcomes (as open text), the awarding body, the entry requirements, ways to acquire the qualifications, the relationship to occupations or occupational fields, and a link to the qualification. The EHIS also includes information on credit points (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

Learning outcomes are embedded within curricula rather than stored as separate, searchable elements in national databases. For formal education, all curricula—include descriptions of learning outcomes. For professional qualifications, learning outcomes are reflected through performance criteria described within each competency standard. These competences are maintained in a dedicated database, which also indicates their relevance across various qualification standards and highlights their transferability (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Both registers are interconnected with many public services, [ESCO](#) (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) and the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund database ⁽¹⁶⁾. The [Education Portal](#) is a one-stop shop providing information from the existing databases from the perspective of the end user (teacher, learner, counsellor, youth worker, etc.) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

The registers are in the planning phase of connecting to the Europass platform via the Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR), with data on professional standards transmitted to the QDR ⁽¹⁷⁾. While they contain relevant information, neither aligns with the European Learning Model version 3 (ELM.3) or is connected to the Europass infrastructure. The main challenge is that all data is currently only in Estonian, and transitioning to ELM.3 requires translation and structural changes. Alignment is planned once funding is secured to support translation and data migration. ELM.3 is currently being tested for VET, with potential expansion depending on resources and the complexity of updating systems (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

7.6. Awareness and use of the NQF

Awareness of the EstQF/EQF varies across stakeholder groups. Among students, awareness is moderate, as qualification levels are well integrated into curricula, particularly in VET. However, many struggle to understand the rights associated with their certificates and the differences between qualifications awarded in formal education and professional qualifications. Workers and jobseekers also have a moderate level of awareness, especially in regulated fields where certification is required. In unregulated professions, the framework's significance is lower.

Education and training providers, as well as quality assurance bodies and recognition authorities, have a high or very high level of awareness, as the framework plays a crucial role in curriculum design, quality control, and credential recognition. All professional qualification standards, VET and higher education standards, and formal educational curricula are designed with reference to the EstQF level descriptors. For example, all VET curricula have a compulsory annex referencing the curriculum against the EstQF. Providers also indicate EstQF/EQF levels when advertising study programmes. Guidance and counselling practitioners have a moderate understanding and are being trained to use the EstQF as their work often involves referencing qualifications in regulated professions where a professional certificate is required. Skills analysis studies are

⁽¹⁶⁾ Estonia is running mapping tests to connect the EHIS with European digital credentials for learning.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

used in career counselling activities as they offer a thorough overview of the level of qualifications used in the labour market and labour market skill needs. Training materials for guidance practitioners have been developed by the EQF NCP and the Euroguidance and Europass centres.

Labour market stakeholders, including employers, trade unions, and employment services, demonstrate moderate awareness. Trade unions, given their limited influence in Estonia, mainly engage with the framework in specific professions. To participate in public procurement, companies must employ a specialist holding a qualification at a specific EstQF/EQF level. Since 2020, EstQF levels have been included in job advertisements. In several economic sectors, wages are also linked to holding a specific qualification level. Quality assurance bodies and recognition authorities also rely on the EstQF/EQF (see Section 4.4) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

7.7. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

An [impact assessment](#) of the EstQF was carried out in 2022–2023. The Estonian Qualifications Authority commissioned the Estonian Research Centre to perform an impact study of the Europass and EstQF information campaign, assessing, among other things, citizens' awareness of EstQF levels. The study used a questionnaire to measure awareness levels and found that the Authority's newsletters, social media channels and events, such as information sessions and workshops, were key sources of information. The results highlighted the effectiveness of diverse communication channels and pointed to areas for improving outreach. Information from European Union institutions, via social media, newsletters, and websites, has also proved valuable in highlighting the EU's involvement in education and qualifications. Further, exchanges with colleagues have reinforced the importance of professional networks for sharing insights and expertise. These findings have influenced communication strategies and informed the planning of future NQF development activities. More specifically, the study showed that 11% of respondents were encouraged by the campaign to become informed about the level of their qualification, while 58% of those already aware of the EstQF indicated the web page of the Estonian Qualifications Authority as the primary source of information. One overall outcome of the study is that these campaigns should continue. The [Quality of Higher Education in Estonia](#) study aims to provide an overview of the implementation of the learning outcomes approach in higher education and an assessment of the compliance of curricula with national and international regulations, including the EQF Recommendation (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

7.8. Impact of the NQF

As all qualifications included in the EstQF are expressed on the basis of learning outcomes and indicate the EstQF level, the transparency and comparability of qualifications have increased. This improvement is evident both within regulated professions and increasingly in non-regulated sectors. The framework has contributed to quality assurance, ensuring that qualifications across various professions are more consistently described and assessed. For example, it is now clearer that different professions require different entry-level qualifications, supporting more accurate alignment of qualifications with job roles. By clearly defining the scope and level of qualifications, the framework has made it easier for stakeholders to understand what each certificate allows a holder to do. Qualification registers and databases further support this transparency, facilitating both national and international recognition (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The implementation of the EstQF has helped identify gaps and imbalances in the provision of qualifications. For example, there were no qualifications from initial education and training at EstQF level 5. The labour market relevance of these types of qualification, supported by various stakeholders, has influenced policy decisions. The framework has also prompted a review of the provision of professional higher qualifications referenced to EstQF level 6.

As the EstQF includes qualifications from formal education, along with professional qualifications, and as VET and higher education programmes are based on professional qualification standards (where these exist), the framework is considered to have contributed considerably to the parity of esteem between different types of qualifications. The EstQF has also led to a significant convergence between formal education and the professional qualifications system (Estonian Qualifications Authority, 2016), lowering barriers between sectors. The framework supports both vertical and horizontal mobility, helping individuals move more easily between vocational and higher education and has promoted progression through education and training. For example, entry to higher education programmes in some occupations has been simplified for learners who obtain a level 4 VET qualification in a specific area.

The fact that professional qualifications levels are negotiated within sectoral councils has increased dialogue and stakeholder cooperation across sectors and institutions.

Through all these developments, the NQF has strongly promoted lifelong learning and increased the value of levelled qualifications, especially in contexts such as public procurement and regulated professions where clarity of competence is essential (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

8. Referencing to the EQF

The EstQF was referenced to the EQF and self-certified against the QF-EHEA in 2011 (Estonian Qualifications Authority, 2011). Following the 2013 VET reform, the referencing report was updated in 2016. The next update of the referencing report is planned for 2024–25, after the adoption of the Adult Training Act and the formation of the EQF Steering Committee (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

9. Reflections and plans

One important success factor is the direct connection of the EstQF level descriptors with curricula and professional qualifications. This provides a clear reference point for curriculum design, promotes the transparency of qualifications and helps people to find learning opportunities. Consequently, referencing to the EQF has improved the comparability of qualifications both nationally and with those from foreign countries, supporting opportunities for international learner mobility (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024). Another success factor has been systematic promotion activities for stakeholders, through structures such as the sectoral councils and the body of chairmen of sectoral councils. The EQF NCP and Europass activities, which are part of EU-funded projects, along with cooperation with Euroguidance, have increased awareness of the EstQF among stakeholders and end users ⁽¹⁸⁾.

One major challenge is that no correlation mechanism has been set up to include previously offered qualifications in the EstQF. Another key challenge is the continued use of qualifications, diplomas and certificates to express an individual's knowledge and competences, rather than expressing them in learning outcomes. This limits the framework's full potential (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Regarding future priorities, the reform of the [professional qualifications system](#) (see Section 2.1) aims to align vocational education and training better with labour market demands ⁽¹⁹⁾. At the heart of this effort is the enhancement of the EstQF, which ensures that different qualifications are clear and comparable. A key part of this is updating the [level descriptors](#) that form the basis for developing professional standards. These improvements will help create well-defined and accessible career paths, ensuring that qualifications remain relevant to the changing needs of the economy and society. Overall, the reform supports a more cohesive skills

⁽¹⁸⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

⁽¹⁹⁾ More on the [reform of the professional qualifications system](#).

system that promotes both mobility and lifelong learning ⁽²⁰⁾. Further, there are regulated narrower qualifications that have not yet been levelled to the EstQF. The adoption of the Adult Education Act provides the opportunity to formalise them as microcredentials, and provided they meet the volume and quality requirements, it will become possible to include them in the framework (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024). Another priority could be to further increase awareness of the EstQF among end users.

Acronyms

EHIS	Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem (Estonian education infosystem)
ENIC-NARIC	European Network of National Information Centres and Network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres
EstQF	Estonian qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework

⁽²⁰⁾ Source: internal communication with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

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Estonian Qualifications Authority.
EQF NCP.
EHIS.
Professional qualifications register.