

ESTONIA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Estonia is positioned well on several education and training indicators, with high performance in basic skills, and a high rate of tertiary education attainment (46.6% in 2014, compared to the EU average of 37.9%). The employment rate for recent graduates and public investment in education are also above average. Some of the challenges in the country include a significant gender gap in education (15.3% of young males left education and training early in 2014, compared to only 7.5% of young females), increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) and improving the provision of apprenticeships (European Commission. 2015). The national lifelong learning strategy ⁽¹⁾ has set five goals for 2020, aiming to tackle existing challenges in a holistic approach: a change in the approach to learning; competent and motivated teachers and school leadership; concordance of lifelong learning opportunities with the needs of labour market; a digital focus in lifelong learning; equal opportunities and increased participation in lifelong learning.

There is a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning, the Estonian qualifications framework (EstQF), established in 2008 through the Professions Act ⁽²⁾. It has eight levels and includes all State-recognised qualifications. The overarching framework brings together four sub-frameworks; for higher education qualifications ⁽³⁾, for vocational education and training (VET) qualifications ⁽⁴⁾, for general education qualifications ⁽⁵⁾ and for

⁽¹⁾ The Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020: <https://www.hm.ee/en/estonian-lifelong-learning-strategy-2020> .

⁽²⁾ The Professions Act, entered into force on 1 September 2008:
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/501072015005/consolide>

⁽³⁾ Referred to as standard of higher education.

⁽⁴⁾ Referred to as vocational education standard.

⁽⁵⁾ Referred to as national curriculum for basic schools and national curriculum for upper secondary schools.

occupational qualifications ⁽⁶⁾. The sub-frameworks include specific descriptors as defined in the corresponding national educational standards, underpinning quality assurance activities.

Referencing of the EstQF to the EQF and self-certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) was completed in 2011; the joint report was endorsed in the EQF advisory group in October 2011. The referencing report was revised and updated in 2016 to include recent developments in the education system (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016).

Policy objectives

The NQF ambition in Estonia is twofold: to be a tool for transparency and communication and to support lifelong learning. More specifically, policy objectives addressed by the NQF are to:

- (a) improve the link between education/training and the labour market;
- (b) increase consistency of the educational offer and of the qualification system;
- (c) provide transparency for employers and individuals;
- (d) increase understanding of Estonian qualifications within the country and abroad;
- (e) introduce common quality assurance criteria;
- (f) support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (g) monitor supply and demand for learning.

It is expected that implementation of an overarching NQF will increase coherence of education and training, and help introduce coherent methods for standard-setting. The referencing process has already provided a stimulus in this direction, and 'convergence of the formal educational system and occupational qualifications system has taken place', while the barriers between the two systems have been lowered (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016). Occupational qualifications have been placed into the EstQF and referenced to the EQF from the start.

⁽⁶⁾ Occupational qualifications are those associated with a trade, occupation or profession, usually resulting from work-based learning, in-service training, and adult education.

Another important policy objective is to increase adult participation in lifelong learning from 12.9% in 2012 to 20% in 2020, set as a national target in the Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020. Performance in this slightly decreased to 11.5% in 2014 (European Commission, 2015), but in 2015 it started to increase again: it was 12.4%, rising to 17.6% in the second quarter of 2016 ⁽⁷⁾. A particular concern is reducing the number of adults without a vocational or occupational qualification. The labour market in Estonia cannot be considered (highly) regulated by qualifications, as only a small proportion of professions and occupations is regulated, and about one third of the workforce does not have professional qualifications. The Government sees this as a problem and plans measures to open access to qualifications (Cedefop, 2014).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The comprehensive EstQF has eight qualification levels; its descriptors are identical to EQF level descriptors. They are defined in terms of learning outcomes, as knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills (cognitive skills - use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking; and practical skills - manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and degree of responsibility and autonomy (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016). More detailed descriptors have been developed in the four sub-frameworks for general education, initial vocational education, higher education and occupational qualifications. An EstQF level is assigned to each of the qualifications in these sub-frameworks.

Two types of State-recognised qualifications are included in the EstQF:

- (a) formal education qualifications, awarded after completion of educational programmes at all levels (general, vocational and higher education);
- (b) occupational qualifications ⁽⁸⁾, where individuals are issued a professional certificate, giving the evidence of knowledge, skills and competences required for working in a specific occupation or profession.

⁽⁷⁾ Statistics Estonia (2016): life-long learning: <http://www.stat.ee/71726>

⁽⁸⁾ There are 570 valid occupational qualifications based on occupational standards, which can be placed at levels 2 to 8 of the NQF. They can be gained through formal education, adult education and in-service training. (Estonian Qualifications Authority and Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2016).

Qualifications in sub-frameworks are described in the corresponding national educational standards, which are learning outcomes based:

- (a) national curriculum for basic schools;
- (b) simplified national curriculum for basic schools;
- (c) national curriculum for upper secondary schools;
- (d) standard of VET;
- (e) standard of higher education ⁽⁹⁾;
- (f) occupational qualifications standards.

Introducing a learning outcomes approach is an important part of the national reform programme for general education, VET and higher education; the topic is covered in various regulatory acts. Linked to this is increased focus on recognition of prior learning (RPL). Higher and vocational education are more advanced in implementing the learning-outcomes approach; in general education this approach is not yet widely applied but implementation is part of the lifelong learning strategy (strategic goal: 'Change in the approach to learning'). The main challenge appears to be take-up among teachers and school administrators. While learning outcomes have been embedded in curricula for a long time, the focus in education delivery has been on process rather than learning outcomes. The role of employers could also be more extensive and constructive to derive full benefits from applying this approach (Cedefop, 2016).

Learning outcomes of different types of VET are described in the vocational education standard and correspond to levels 2 to 5 of the EstQF. The vocational education standard describes the requirements for national and school curricula, including objectives, expected learning outcomes, volumes of study and graduation requirements for different types of initial and continuous VET programmes and requirements for pedagogical professionals. Learning outcomes are defined as occupation-specific knowledge and skills as well as transversal skills (communication; learning, social and entrepreneurial skills; self-awareness; independence and responsibility). Reform of VET curricula was launched in September 2013 and by September 2016, 20 new national VET curricula were approved (Estonian Qualifications Authority and Ministry of Education and Research, 2016). Together with national curricula of the previous generation they cover the whole spectrum of specialities. VET institutions have implemented

⁽⁹⁾ In the sub-framework for higher education, general descriptors follow the logic of the Dublin descriptors, but are adjusted to national needs.

more than 600 learning outcome-based new curricula. Since 2013, study volume in VET is expressed using Estonian VET credit points.

The current national curricula in general education were gradually introduced between 2010 and 2013. They set out goals and objectives, expected learning outcomes, assessment criteria and requirements for the learning and teaching environment, graduation and school curriculum.

New study programmes based on learning outcomes were implemented in higher education as of September 2009. The Estonian standard of higher education refers to learning outcomes at basic level (outcomes that any graduate must achieve) and achievement of learning outcomes above the minimum level is differentiated by grading. The Universities Act ⁽¹⁰⁾ and the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act ⁽¹¹⁾ now allow for accreditation of prior and experiential learning in higher education curricula.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education and Research with the Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) ⁽¹²⁾ are the main bodies in charge of developing and implementing the EstQF. The Qualification Authority was established in 2001 to develop a competence-based professional qualifications system ⁽¹³⁾, put in place in parallel to the formal education system under the Ministry of Education and Research. In 2010, by decision of the Ministry of Education and Research, the Qualifications Authority was nominated as the national coordination point for EQF implementation (EQF NCP) ⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Universities Act:
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/521032014002/consolide>

⁽¹¹⁾ The Institutions of Professional Higher Education:
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/504112013013/consolide>

⁽¹²⁾ *Kutsekoda* (Estonian Qualifications Authority): <http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/index>

⁽¹³⁾ Based on the Occupational Qualifications Act in 2001, professional qualifications were referenced to a five-level professional framework where level 1 was the lowest and level 5 the highest. Today, professional qualifications are assigned to levels 2 to 8 in the EstQF.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Currently, the day-to-day running of the EstQF is supported by two part-time employees and one full-time employee of the Qualifications Authority; the annual budget for EstQF-related activities is EUR 104 400. (Cedefop, 2015. *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs.*)

A broad-based steering committee was also established ⁽¹⁵⁾, to ensure the involvement of all key stakeholders in NQF-related processes. It includes representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, State Chancellery, Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, Estonian Qualifications Authority, Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions, Estonian Employers' Confederation, Estonian Association of Pupils' Unions, Estonian Association of Student Unions, Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, and the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre. The mandate of the steering committee has so far been limited to the referencing process. By March 2017, it is expected that the steering committee and its mandate will be renewed, and its responsibilities revised, to include monitoring of implementation and of the impact of the EstQF.

The Qualifications Authority coordinates the 14 sector skills councils and provides technical support to the Board of Chairmen of these councils. Typically, institutions represented in sector skills councils are: employers' organisations in the sector; trade unions in the sector; professional associations in the sector; education and training institutions; and responsible ministries. They are responsible for preparing, amending, renewing or approving professional standards, and for deciding on the linking of occupational qualifications to the EstQF. The Board of Chairmen of the Sector Skills Councils coordinates cross-sectoral cooperation.

The Qualifications Authority also cooperates with other institutions, disseminates information and provides guidance and advice to various stakeholders on application of the framework. The dissemination of information and guidance on implementation of the framework are carried out mostly through partners and participants to the occupational qualifications system: the sector skills councils, professional examination committees, and experts. Different kinds of dissemination and information event are organised annually to share information with education providers, policy makers, and employer and employee organisations.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Directive No 925/2010 of the Minister for Education and Research.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁶⁾

Validation practices in Estonia are well developed in the formal education sector. Higher education has led validation developments, though other sectors – especially VET – have followed the same path. The current challenge is to create a unified system: the current model is decentralised and it could be difficult for potential applicants to find their way around the system.

Development of the EstQF has supporting validation among its objectives, and the updated referencing report (September 2016) clearly signals this. For all qualifications included in the framework, the curricula and the relevant regulations of each subsystem ⁽¹⁷⁾ enable education providers to recognise non-formal and informal learning. The awarding institutions establish their procedures for RPL. A credit point system that conforms to the ECTS is used in higher education, and a credit point system that conforms to the ECVET is used in VET. EstQF development has also been accompanied by development of learning outcome-based programmes that have helped the introduction of validation principles.

Validation allows for access to higher education and VET institutions, as well as exemption from parts of a programme, but in higher education a final examination/thesis is needed. In VET, validation possibilities are wider - passing professional exam (professional certificate issued) can replace the school leaving exam. For admission to higher education, a specified level of education needs to be achieved. Some learning outcomes in primary school may be recognised with agreement of a student's parents and school's representatives. Full occupational qualifications can be awarded through RPL.

Validation (especially in higher education) has developed rapidly due to European Social Fund (ESF) funding of the *Primus* programme ⁽¹⁸⁾ that ended in 2013. The project started in 2008 and produced a network of validation professionals with various specialties who created and gathered statistics on

⁽¹⁶⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Standard of VET and Standard of higher education.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Archimedes foundation (2008): *Primus: higher education quality enhancement programme in Estonia* (2008-14).
http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/teavitus/Primus_eng.pdf

validation, and developed guideline materials ⁽¹⁹⁾ for applicants, assessors and consultants. Since 2015, validation-related initiatives have been planned by the Ministry of Education and Research: these widen access to education via validation of previous experience, implementation of the RPL data to the education database, and more precise regulation of validation of non-formal and informal learning in general education. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is also supported from the ESF programme for adult education.

One of the objectives of the Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020 is to create equal opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone; allowing use of prior learning experiences at secondary education level a key activity. The Adult education programme 2016-19 ⁽²⁰⁾ states that validation principles for general education will be developed and training is provided for validation counsellors and assessors. Also, overall validation data collection is one of the targeted activities. The Higher education programme 2016-19 ⁽²¹⁾ features validation as a means for flexible study by supporting access to higher education for various groups of learners. The Vocational education programme 2016-19 ⁽²²⁾ states that an increase in the number of validation applications is expected and assessment quality has improved. It is expected that validation-related initiatives will be supported in the future.

NQF implementation

The Estonian NQF has reached a full operational stage in many respects. The Ministry of Education and Research and the Estonian Qualifications Authority are

⁽¹⁹⁾ These materials were widely used in higher education, but also in VET, by adult education providers and in developing the professional qualification system. Principles of validation of non-formal and informal learning were implemented in several ESF programmes, such as the Development of VET (VET providers network), Development of professional qualifications system, programme *TULE* (bringing higher education drop-outs back to education through RPL), *KUTSE* (bringing VET drop-outs back to school using RPL).

⁽²⁰⁾ Täiskasvanuhariduse programm 2016-2019:
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/lisa_9_taiskasvanuhariduse_programm_2016-2019.pdf

⁽²¹⁾ Kõrgharidusprogramm 2016-2019:
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/lisa_8_korghariduse_programm_2016-2019.pdf

⁽²²⁾ Kutseharidusprogramm 2016-2019:
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/lisa_7_kutseharidusprogramm_2016-2019.pdf

the main bodies involved in its implementation. A legal and institutional framework was set up by the amended Professions Act of 2008 and key responsibilities and roles of different stakeholders have been agreed. Quality criteria for inclusion and positioning of qualifications in the framework have been adopted. The framework includes all State-recognised qualifications, which have to meet two basic criteria: to be defined in learning-outcomes-based qualifications standards (curriculum or professional standards) and to be awarded by nationally accredited institutions.

The EstQF is well established, especially the sub-frameworks for VET, higher education and occupational qualifications. General education is formally connected to the overarching framework through relevant State programmes but the substantive link and common awareness about learning outcomes and qualification levels is rather weak in this subsystem. The *Strategy of lifelong learning 2020* does not refer explicitly to the EstQF, while in the new draft Law on education the EstQF and its levels are described only in relation to VET, due to the fact that the EstQF is already described in the Professions Act. ⁽²³⁾

Implementation of the overarching framework has triggered discussions between stakeholders and has been used to identify gaps and imbalances in the provision of qualifications. For instance, EstQF level 5 was a focus of public debate from formal adoption of the framework in 2008. The main discussion centred on the fact that there were no qualifications from initial education and training identified at this level, only occupational qualifications. The need for these types of qualifications in the labour market, supported by different stakeholders, has impacted on policy decisions.

Following intense consultation with all stakeholders, a new VET Act came into force in mid-2013 ⁽²⁴⁾, along with a new standard of VET. It substantially transformed the VET system and introduced qualifications at level 5 (both in initial and continuing VET), as previously there were no initial education qualifications at this level. It also established a new quality assurance framework for VET and the Estonian VET credit system. It stipulates five types of VET qualifications ⁽²⁵⁾.

⁽²³⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

⁽²⁴⁾ VET Institutions Act: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/122122013002>

⁽²⁵⁾ (a) VET certificate, EstQF level 2;

(b) VET certificate, EstQF level 3;

(c) upper secondary VET certificate, EstQF level 4;

The framework has also been used to revisit current provision of professional higher qualifications referenced to EstQF level 6. It informs curriculum reform in VET and fine-tuning qualification descriptions from VET and higher education with NQF level descriptors.

EstQF and EQF levels have been indicated on higher education and occupational qualifications (that meet the requirements for inclusion into the EstQF) since 2012, and on general education and VET qualifications since 2013. Including the EstQF and EQF levels on Europass diploma and certificate supplements is general practice. The levels are also indicated in national qualifications databases, such as the VET curricula database ⁽²⁶⁾ and the register of occupational standards ⁽²⁷⁾. There are continuing discussions and plans to include EstQF and EQF levels into the envisaged new version of the Estonian education database (EHIS2).

Referencing to the EQF

Estonia completed the referencing of the EstQF to the EQF and self-certified the compatibility of the EstQF for higher education with the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in October 2011. Following the 2013 VET reform, the referencing report was revised and presented to the EQF advisory group in 2015. In September 2016, an updated report was submitted, following the EQF AG recommendations.

Important lessons and future plans

One key objective of the EstQF is to improve comparability between formal school leaving certificates and occupational qualifications. Development of the framework and the referencing process have already contributed to this objective by building up a more coherent and responsive lifelong learning system. The

(d) VET certificate, EstQF level 4;

(e) VET certificate, EstQF level 5.

⁽²⁶⁾ VET curricula database:

<https://enda.ehis.ee/avalik/avalik/oppekava/OppekavaOtsi.faces>

⁽²⁷⁾ Register of occupational standards:

<http://kutsekoda.ee/et/kutseregister/kutsestandardid>

process has been intense. As observed in the referencing report, 'a remarkable convergence' between the education system and the professional qualification system has taken place (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016).

Occupational qualifications that link lifelong learning with the labour market can be distributed on levels 2 to 8 of the EstQF, clearly indicating that not only higher education qualifications can be assigned to levels 6 to 8 ⁽²⁸⁾. Strict quality criteria have to be met: qualifications are based on professional standards and developed in cooperation with social partners, and awarding bodies have to be accredited. The relationship between occupational and VET qualifications was discussed in the EQF advisory group, covering how occupational qualifications differ and/or complement qualifications awarded in the initial education system. There are two main ways to obtain vocational or occupational qualifications (*kutsekvalifikatsioon*) in Estonia: either via work experience and assessment against a professional standard or via a VET programme based on professional standards as well as broader educational objectives. Both types of qualification have the same value on the labour market. According to the Professions Act of 2008, both VET and higher education institutions which have curricula based on professional standards and are accredited against quality standards could apply to become an occupational qualifications awarding body. Some kind of convergence of these two systems is expected.

Current activities for occupational qualifications include development and implementation of monitoring, analysis and forecasting of labour market needs (quantitative and qualitative) during 2015-20 ⁽²⁹⁾.

A new Adult Education Act ⁽³⁰⁾ was adopted in 2015, aiming at increasing the quality of adult learning through introducing the learning outcomes approach into curriculum design and assessment.

⁽²⁸⁾ Occupational qualifications at levels 6 to 8 require mostly higher education qualifications as a basis.

⁽²⁹⁾ During 2015-20 the monitoring, analysis and forecasting of labour market needs are being developed and implemented through the OSKA programme (a system of labour market monitoring and future skills forecasting). Each year, the need for labour and skills is analysed and recommendations for training requirements are prepared in five or six sectors. In 2016, forecasts of the need for labour and skills were prepared in the following sectors: accounting; forestry and timber industry; information and communication technology; manufacturing of metal products, machinery and equipment; social work. More information can be found at: <http://oska.kutsekoda.ee/en/>

⁽³⁰⁾ New Education Act: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/529062015007/consolide>

According to the Estonian Qualifications Authority ⁽³¹⁾, the main overall challenge related to the EstQF is recognition as a backbone of the national qualifications system and as a focal point of the system for lifelong learning. This could be addressed by increasing awareness of EstQF among end-users.

Further sources of information:

[URLs accessed 1.11.2016]

The Estonian Qualification Authority is designated as EQF national coordination point: <http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/index>

Information on NQF development is available at:

<http://www.valew.eu/project-valew/project-partners/6-estonian-qualification-authority>

⁽³¹⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

Estonian qualifications framework

NQF levels	Education qualifications	Occupational qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree (<i>Doktorikraad</i>)	Level 8 occupational qualification Example: chartered engineer, chartered architect	8
7	Master degree (<i>Magistrikraad</i>)	Level 7 occupational qualification Example: diploma engineer, diploma architect	7
6	Bachelor degree (<i>Bakalaureusekraad</i>) Diploma of professional higher education (<i>Rakenduskõrgharidusõppe diplom</i>)	Level 6 occupational qualification Example: engineer	6
5	VET certificate, level 5 (<i>5. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 5 occupational qualification Example: master carpenter, construction site manager	5
4	Upper secondary general education certificate (<i>Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus</i>) Upper secondary VET certificate (<i>Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus</i>) VET certificate, level 4 (<i>4. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 4 occupational qualification Example: IT specialist	4
3	VET qualification certificate, level 3 (<i>3. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 3 occupational qualification Example: carpenter	3
2	Basic education certificate (<i>Põhikooli lõputunnistus</i>) Basic education certificate based on simplified curriculum (<i>Põhikooli lihtsustatud õppekava lõputunnistus</i>) VET certificate, level 2 (without basic education requirement) (<i>2. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus</i>)	Level 2 occupational qualification Example: cook assistant	2
1	Basic education certificate based on curriculum (for students with moderate and severe learning disabilities) (<i>Põhikooli toimetuleku õppekava lõputunnistus</i>)		1

Source: Adapted from Estonian Qualifications Authority and Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (2016).

List of abbreviations

ENIC	European network of information centres
EQF	European qualifications framework
EstQF	Estonian qualifications framework
NARIC	national academic recognition information centres
NQF	national qualifications framework
RPL	recognition of prior learning
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 1.11.2016]

Cedefop (2014). *Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to higher education*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop working paper; No 23.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/6123>

Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study*. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>

European Commission (2015). *Education and training monitor 2015: Estonia*.

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/tools/docs/2015/monitor2015-estonia_en.pdf

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report Estonia*.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

Estonian Qualifications Authority; Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (2016). *Referencing of the Estonian qualifications and qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*.

https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2015_referencing_report_revised.pdf