

MALTA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Malta has been investing significantly in its education and training system in recent years. School education reforms aim to modernise curricula, improve teaching quality and promote digital skills. However, the early school leaving rate – even if declining – remains the second highest in the EU at 19.8% in 2015, well above the national 2020 target of 11%; the tertiary educational attainment rate for native born Maltese is still below the EU average (European Commission, 2016). In this respect, the Malta qualifications framework (MQF) is an important tool for developing lifelong learning and adult learning opportunities, given that adult participation in lifelong learning was relatively low, at 7.2% in 2015, below the EU average (10.7% in 2015).

Malta has been developing its comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning (MQF) since June 2007. It includes qualifications and awards at all levels of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Important amendments in 2012 to the Education Act established the legal basis for the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), replacing the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC) and the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE). The NCFHE is now responsible for all aspects of the MQF. Three legal notices were published: on quality assurance and licensing of further and higher education institutions and programmes ⁽¹⁾; on validation of informal and non-formal learning ⁽²⁾; and on strengthening the legal basis of the MQF for lifelong learning as a regulatory framework for classification of qualifications and awards ⁽³⁾. Malta was the first country (as recognised by the Council of Europe) to reference the MQF to two European overarching

⁽¹⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Education Act (CAP. 327. 433): further and higher education (licensing, accreditation and quality assurance) regulations, 2012. Legal Notice 296 of 2012, as amended by Legal Notice 150 of 2015:*

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11929&l=1>

⁽²⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Education Act (CAP. 327): validation of non-formal and informal learning regulation, 2012. Legal Notice 295 of 2012:*

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=23720&l=1>

⁽³⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Malta qualifications framework for lifelong learning. Legal Notice 294 of 2012 (Subsidiary Legislation 327.431).*

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11927>

frameworks, the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) as well as the transnational qualifications framework of the small States of the commonwealth (TQF).

The recent referencing report (NCFHE, 2016) has updated the MQF by introducing two additional levels covering learning below level 1: introductory level A and introductory level B. These new levels have been introduced to recognise any prior learning, as well as to provide a stepping stone towards level 1 and further learning and employment.

Policy objectives

The Malta qualifications framework (MQF) makes the qualifications system easier to understand and review, and more transparent at national and international levels. This framework also functions as a referencing tool for describing and comparing national and foreign qualifications to promote and address the following issues:

- (a) transparency and understanding of qualifications;
- (b) valuing all formal, informal and non-formal learning;
- (c) consistency and coherence with European and international qualifications frameworks;
- (d) parity of esteem of qualifications from different learning pathways, including vocational and professional degrees and academic study programmes;
- (e) lifelong learning, access and progression and mobility;
- (f) the shift towards learning outcomes-based qualifications;
- (g) a credit structure and units as qualification building blocks;
- (h) the concept of mutual trust through quality assurance mechanisms running across all levels of the framework.

The MQF is seen as an important tool in promoting lifelong learning. The widespread public approval of the MQF has encouraged enrolment on study programmes and acquiring qualifications registered with the MQF. Scholarship schemes and tax rebate initiatives are linked to the qualification's MQF level rating. Eligibility criteria for recruitment to any public institution also specify the required MQF level rating (and, in some cases, also the ECTS/ECVET workload). Government policy supporting pluralism in the provision of further and higher education, together with a desire to promote internationalisation, has led to a growth in the number of registered licence holders able to offer MQF level-rated qualifications. This expansion has also generated the need for a more robust and

rigorous registration process prior to issuing a license as well as quality assurance reviews for the lifetime of the licence. The growth of licence holders from 30 in 2007 to 140 in 2016 has necessitated the publication of a public register of licence holders and of approved qualifications (⁴).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

Strengthening the learning outcomes approach has become fundamental to education and training reform and has been applied across all qualifications and levels in recent years. The education strategy framework 2014-24 – *Sustaining foundations, creating alternatives, increasing employability* (Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, 2014a) – has reinforced the intention to adopt a learning outcomes approach in all sectors of education and training linked to the MQF, and to update existing learning programmes and assessment modes.

The MQF has eight learning-outcomes-based qualification levels, plus the two additional entry levels below level 1; introductory level A and B. These two new levels have no equivalence on the EQF. Each level descriptor is defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence and the learning outcomes achieved. The descriptors highlight specific attributes: communication, judgemental and learning skills, and the complexity, volume and level of learning expected for the particular qualification or award. Progression within the MQF is recorded in terms of:

- (a) knowledge and understanding;
- (b) applying knowledge and understanding;
- (c) communication skills;
- (d) judgemental skills;
- (e) learning skills;
- (f) autonomy and responsibility.

One of the tasks of the NCFHE is to introduce national standards of knowledge, skills and competences, and to ensure that these are systematically implemented, used and revised. Courses accredited by the NCFHE and those by the self-accrediting training providers (public, further and higher education institutions) will use the learning outcomes approach. The MQF provides a clear commitment to focus on the learning outcomes approach at policy level; however, it is less clear how this will be carried out in all education sectors, as reported in the Cedefop study on learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016).

⁴) Both registers are available at: <http://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/register/Pages/register.aspx>

The report *A national curriculum framework for all* outlines the role of learning outcomes in general education (Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012c). The reform of the national curriculum framework has led to the development of learning outcomes for all subjects within all sectors of compulsory education. Learning outcomes will be used to benchmark and record the educational development of all Maltese students in compulsory education. The reform aims to move away from a prescriptive curriculum based on standalone subjects, towards a framework which allows for internal flexibility and promotes inclusiveness, citizenship and employability. During 2016, the government will prepare a plan to introduce the learning outcomes framework by September 2017. The Institute for Education will start to provide specific training for teachers (Maltese Ministry of Finance, 2016).

The MQF is intended to ensure that VET curricula are focused on key competences and learning outcomes based on feedback from industry. The development of occupational standards and sector skills units is a work in progress.

Malta also has a range of adult education courses accredited and level-rated on the MQF. These qualifications and awards enable adults to engage in lifelong learning and perhaps to progress to higher MQF levels.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

A wide range of stakeholders has been involved in the development and setting up of the MQF. The MQC initiated the work, following Legal Notice 347 of 2005⁽⁵⁾ in cooperation with all stakeholders, including ministries and the NCHE. The NCFHE (under the Ministry of Education and Employment) is now the responsible authority for the MQF, and has produced the fourth referencing report (NCHE, 2016) in consultation with national stakeholders such as the Employment and Training Corporation, which is the main employment service in Malta; representatives of education and training providers; social partners; the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education and the Directorate for Lifelong Learning. It also acts as the national coordination point for the European qualifications framework, ReferNet, and forms part of the ENIC-NARIC network.

⁽⁵⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Subsidiary Legislation 343.26. Malta qualifications council regulations. Legal Notice 347 of 2005. Revoked by Legal Notice 325 of 2012.* <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10141&l=1>

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁶⁾

Validation of informal and non-formal learning in Malta is regulated by Subsidiary Legislation 327.432. of 2012 ⁽⁷⁾, which sets the principles for the process. This legislation designates the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) as the authority responsible for introducing a national validation system and for establishing the necessary structures.

The NCFHE is also responsible for providing the resources needed for the department for validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) to function effectively and for leading the development and implementation of national occupational standards in specified areas. The validation which is currently taking place is limited to a few sectors. However, the NCFHE intends to extend the process to more sectors through the continuing development of sector skills units ⁽⁸⁾. Currently, legislation allows validation of informal and non-formal learning up to level 5 of the MQF, based on occupational standards developed by sector representatives. Assessment is by professionals who verify the evidence of the learning outcomes achieved. The individual needs to have support and guidance in gathering the evidence of the learning achieved, and the opportunity to appeal should s/he not accept the validation judgement.

The NCFHE is also responsible for convening meetings with key stakeholders on sector skills. The further development of sector skills units is a significant step towards establishing validation processes at sector level. Formal structures for validation in priority sectors have been developed through the creation of four sector skills units in: i) health and social care; ii) building and construction; iii) hair and beauty; iv) automotive sector; v) printing; vi) educational support; and vii) tourism and hospitality. Another unit is planned for voluntary work-related sectors. Developments are also underway in the tourism sector by

⁽⁶⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al. (forthcoming).

⁽⁷⁾ Government of Malta (2012). Validation of non-formal and informal learning regulation. Subsidiary Legislation 327.432. Legal Notice 295 of 2012 as amended by Legal Notice 194 of 2014.

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11928&l=1>

⁽⁸⁾ A key function of the units is to develop and propose to this committee guidelines and mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning for all skills within their respective sector. They also ensure that validation institutions are meeting the required standards set out for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These sector skills units will identify the different jobs in their particular sector, outline the knowledge, skills and competences required to perform these jobs and map them against the NQF.

the setting up of a committee comprising the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) and key industry players to help identify skill gaps in the ITS curricula as well as to anticipate future industry requirements. Further steps will include the development of occupational standards criteria and the appointment of an assessment board assigned to the sector skills unit.

The value and importance of validation is emphasised in several recently published national policy documents. This includes Malta's *National lifelong learning strategy 2020* (Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, 2014b) that sets a target for setting up a transparent and sustainable system within NCFHE to validate and recognise non-formal and informal learning by the end of 2016.

NQF implementation

The MQF is operational; key documents and responsibilities for its implementation have been agreed among stakeholders and published ⁽⁹⁾. The main body responsible for the MQF is the NCFHE (the former MQC and the NCHE merged in 2010-11); it decides which qualifications and awards to include in the framework. This agency stipulates strategic policies for further and higher education, promotes and maintains the MQF, accredits and licenses all further (post-secondary) and higher education institutions and programmes, and assists training providers in designing qualifications, assessment and certification. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (based at the Ministry of Education and Employment) is responsible for quality assurance and standards in compulsory education.

⁽⁹⁾ See three legal notices:

(a) on quality assurance and licensing of further and higher education institutions and programmes:
<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11929&l=1>

(b) on validation of informal and non-formal learning:
<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=23720&l=1>

(c) on the legal basis of the MQF for lifelong learning:
<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=23719&l=1>

Qualifications and awards included in the MQF should satisfy the following conditions ⁽¹⁰⁾:

- (a) be issued by nationally accredited institutions;
- (b) be based on learning outcomes;
- (c) be internally and externally quality assured;
- (d) be based on workload composed of identified credit value;
- (e) be awarded on successful completion of formal assessment procedures.

The term 'qualification' refers to substantial courses based on learning outcomes at the respective MQF level and a required minimum number of credits, whereas 'award' refers to courses which fulfil the level of learning, but not the requirement in terms of minimum credits. The terms are used to distinguish between 'full qualifications' and shorter courses at the respective level.

Following the setting up of the ESF project 1.227, *Making quality visible* ⁽¹¹⁾, the NCFHE has established the national quality assurance framework which sets the standards for internal and external quality assurance for all further and higher education providers. The process for carrying out external audits has been finalised and guidelines have been published. External quality audits began in May 2015 at the same time as the national quality assurance framework was introduced.

The NCFHE also maintains a register of accredited further and higher education institutions, in accordance with Subsidiary Legislation 327.433 on licensing, accreditation and quality assurance ⁽¹²⁾. It also includes a list of accredited courses offered by licensed institutions with reference to both the MQF and the EQF. This register highlights the level of each course accredited and is updated on a weekly basis.

In respect of public education institutions, the University of Malta issued the first diploma supplements in 2006. They were awarded in 2007 to over 200 graduates and from 2010 were issued automatically and free of charge. The Malta College for Arts, Sciences and Technology and the University of Malta give

⁽¹⁰⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Malta qualifications framework for lifelong learning. Legal Notice 294 of 2012 (Subsidiary Legislation 327.431)*.
<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11927>

⁽¹¹⁾ ESF project 1227:
https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects/ESF%201.227%20Making%20Quality%20Visible/esf1227_making_quality_visible.aspx

⁽¹²⁾ Government of Malta (2012). *Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. Further and higher education (licensing, accreditation and quality assurance), regulations*. Legal Notice 296 of 2012, as amended by Legal Notice 150 of 2015.
<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11929&l=1>

NQF (and EQF) levels on certificate and diploma supplements. According to a recent study conducted by the NCFHE (still unpublished) on the use of Europass diploma supplements and Europass certificate supplements, 62% of students graduating from further education institutions receive a certificate supplement. 86% of students graduating from higher education institutions receive a diploma supplement.

An effective network to promote use of the NQF has been established with employers by the NCFHE through its qualifications recognition information centre. Both employers and individuals are invited to attend information sessions and seminars where they are given information about the Malta qualifications framework and other developments in the further and higher education sector. Other methods of informing potential users about the framework include social media and the NCFHE website, which is continuously updated, as well as dissemination of information posters and leaflets to public and private educational institutions, local councils, and other government entities. The *Jobsplus* ⁽¹³⁾ also uses the MQF as its main criterion for issuing work permits, as well as considering a person's experience. It is envisaged, therefore, that the Malta qualifications framework will continue to be used rigorously ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Referencing to the EQF

In 2009, Malta was the first Member State to prepare a single, joint report which referenced the MQF to both the EQF and the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) (Malta Qualifications Council and Maltese Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009). This approach has been followed by many other countries in their own referencing process. The establishment and referencing of the MQF have led to substantial modernisation. Further editions were published in 2010, 2012 and 2016 ⁽¹⁵⁾. The last – the fourth edition – is currently in use and reflects the range of reforms that have taken place within the education system over the past few years (NCFHE, 2016).

⁽¹³⁾ Previously known as the Employment and Training Corporation.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Cedefop (2015) *Survey on the Sustainability and Visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

⁽¹⁵⁾ See all four editions online: http://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/referencing_report.aspx

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the MQF has served as a catalyst for education reform, addressing key challenges in education, training and the labour market. Consultation on the development of the MQF and preparation for referencing to the EQF and the QF-EHEA were interrelated processes that helped bridge the gap between stakeholders from different subsystems of education and employment. The updated referencing report (NCFHE, 2016) and the development of the national quality assurance framework for further and higher education (NCFHE, 2015b), as well as the higher education strategy (NCFHE, 2015a) which proposes further changes in the validation of informal and non-formal learning, constitute important reforms aimed at increasing lifelong learning, mobility and employability.

Despite the improvements brought about by the development and introduction of the MQF, there are still issues to be addressed. There is a need to develop a more modular concept as building blocks for qualifications to support lifelong learning and non-traditional learners. Another growing need is to develop accreditation and quality assurance parameters for digital/online learning, as well as for work-based learning. The national quality assurance framework still needs to develop further and cater better for these areas. The easier movement of students between general education and vocational streams is also very important, as well as better integration of non-formal learning within mainstream education.

Further source of information

The NCFHE is the designated national coordination point:
<http://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx> [accessed 4.11.2016].

Maltese national qualifications framework (MQF)

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree	8

NQF levels	Qualifications		EQF levels
7	Master degree Postgraduate diploma Postgraduate certificate		7
6	Bachelor degree		6
5	Undergraduate diploma Undergraduate certificate	VET higher diploma foundation degree	5
4	Matriculation certificate Advanced level Intermediate level	VET diploma (iv)	4
3	General education (level 3) SEC grade 1 to 5	VET level 3 (iii)	3
2	General education (level 2) SEC grade 6-7	VET level 2 (ii)	2
1	General education (level 1) School leaving certificate	VET level 1 (i)	1
B	Introductory level B (*)		
A	Introductory level A (*)		

(*) These are not yet included in legislation.

(i) A full VET level 1 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as a full secondary school certificate and profile (SSC&P) Level 1.

(ii) A full VET level 2 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as 4 secondary education certificate (SEC) subjects at grade 6 and 7.

(iii) A VET level 3 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as 6 secondary education certificate (SEC) subjects at grades 1 to 5.

(iv) A VET diploma should enjoy the same parity of esteem as the matriculation certificate

Source: Adapted from NCFHE and Ministry of Education and Employment (2016). *Referencing of the Malta qualifications framework (MQF) to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF/EHEA)*.

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
MQC	Malta Qualifications Council
MQF	Malta qualifications framework
NCHE	National Commission for Higher Education
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework in the European higher education area
SEC	secondary school certificate
TQF	transnational qualifications framework of the small States of the Commonwealth
VET	vocational education and training

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