

Online webinar

National qualifications frameworks in action: what is their potential for the Union of Skills?

Background paper

1. Objectives of the webinar

The [webinar](#) will offer policymakers, stakeholders, experts, researchers, and the wider public an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the evolution of [national qualifications frameworks \(NQFs\)](#), as well as current trends across countries participating in the [European qualifications framework \(EQF\)](#) process. Cedefop will present the latest key findings from its policy brief *Making qualifications and skills more visible*, along with its updated [NQF online tool](#). Among others, the webinar will explore:

- (a) how countries make the best use of NQFs;
- (b) how NQFs contribute to making qualifications easier to understand and skills more visible;
- (c) the level of awareness and use of NQFs among learners, employees, jobseekers and companies;
- (d) the potential of NQFs within the Union of Skills.

2. NQFs/EQF and Cedefop's role

The European qualifications framework (EQF) for lifelong learning was adopted in 2008 and revised in 2017 ([Council of the European Union, 2017](#)). It has significantly contributed to increasing transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe. It has also triggered the development of learning outcomes-based NQFs in most of the 41 countries participating in the EQF process ⁽¹⁾. All EU Member States have referenced their NQFs to the EQF, raising the total to 37 EQF countries.

Cedefop's work on qualifications frameworks dates back to 2003. The Agency has contributed to the conceptual development of the EQF and has supported its further implementation, working alongside national authorities and stakeholders to introduce and develop NQFs. Cedefop publishes a [European inventory of NQFs](#), which systematically maps and analyses NQF developments in Europe. The inventory is updated biennially in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation (ETF). This work also feeds into the [Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks](#).

Based on data collected from the inventory, the policy brief *Making qualifications and skills more visible* provides insights into NQFs' main characteristics, scope and coverage, along with a discussion on their impact and the extent to which they are used ⁽²⁾.

⁽¹⁾ The 27 EU Member States, EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland), EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine), and potential candidate countries (Kosovo).

⁽²⁾ Cedefop based its analysis on data from 42 country-specific reports available at the time.

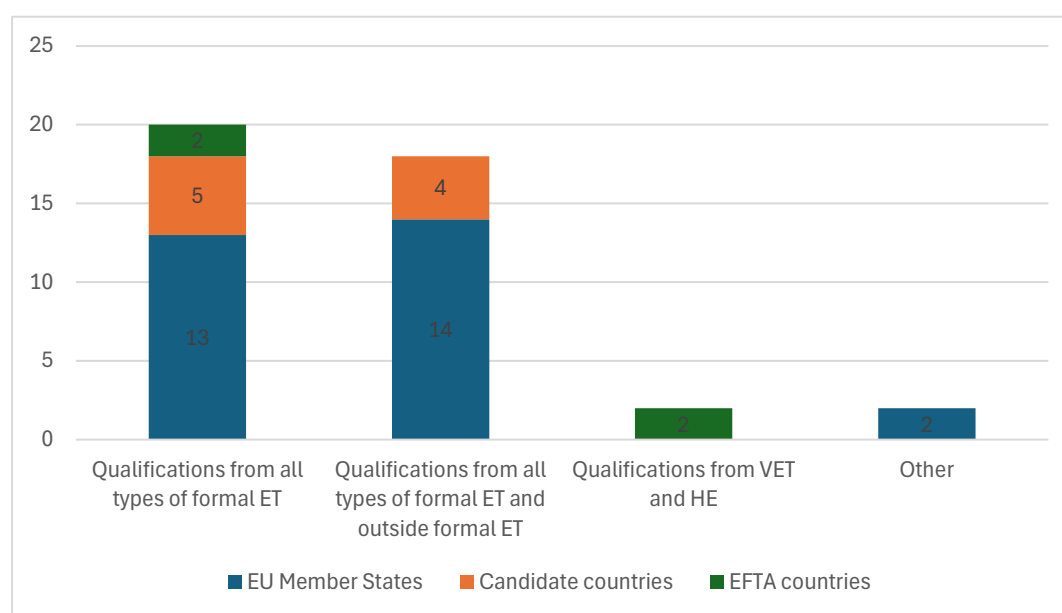
3. Trends in NQF implementation

Compared to qualifications frameworks from other regions of the world, European NQFs can be considered advanced frameworks. Almost 60% of the 42 NQFs analysed are operational ⁽³⁾ and 38% are at the activation stage ⁽⁴⁾.

As NQFs have become more mature, they tend to be more flexible with broader scope and coverage. This helps countries respond to challenges such as making new forms of learning more visible, and recognising knowledge and skills regardless of how they are acquired.

EQF countries have expanded the scope of frameworks by including qualifications awarded within different formal education and training subsystems, and outside formal education and training ⁽⁵⁾. In broad terms, NQFs can be grouped into two categories: NQFs that include qualifications from all formal education and training subsystems (general education, VET, higher education and, in some cases, adult education) (20 countries), and NQFs that also include qualifications awarded outside formal education and training (18 countries) (Figure 5). In total, 20 countries have levelled qualifications awarded outside the formal system.

Figure 1. NQF scope and coverage (2024)



Source: Cedefop.

During the first decade of the EQF process, countries mostly focused on including full formal qualifications in their NQFs. Today, NQFs operate in a constantly changing learning ecosystem demanding flexible learning pathways that can adapt to labour market needs.

⁽³⁾ NQFs at this stage provide a map of levelled qualifications and a reference point for their development and review; NQF/EQF levels are indicated on qualifications, NQF databases are functional, and quality assurance mechanisms are in place ([Cedefop, 2021](#)).

⁽⁴⁾ This is the stage when implementation structures and procedures for levelling qualifications have been set, and the main instruments are being put in place (e.g. databases, quality assurance arrangements); awareness of end users is gradually growing ([Cedefop, 2021](#)).

⁽⁵⁾ Such qualifications vary substantially by national context. They can be awarded, among others, by private providers, labour market stakeholders, adult learning providers, and civil society organisations. They can include microcredentials, non-statutory (market) qualifications, professional/ vocational/ occupational qualifications and awards ([UNESCO et al., 2023](#)).

Thus, EQF countries have increased their efforts to include alternative types of qualifications in the NQFs as well, achieving noteworthy results, particularly regarding microcredentials. In 2024, 18 NQFs included microcredentials (in 15 Member States), while 10 were open to microcredentials but had not yet included them.

4. NQF awareness and use

With European NQFs at a mature development stage, NQF developers and implementers (e.g. qualification developers and relevant public authorities) usually have a solid understanding of how NQFs function. However, awareness among end users (learners, workers, jobseekers and employers) varies by country, remaining overall moderate or low. By contrast, education and training providers are well aware of NQFs.

Learners tend to use them when planning their studies abroad or for recognising knowledge or qualifications acquired abroad. The use of NQFs in the labour market has gradually increased. Workers and jobseekers use NQFs when drafting their CVs, planning to work in another country, looking for a job, and trying to access further training. Approximately 40% of countries reported that NQFs/EQF are used in job advertisements and/or recruitment procedures. However, these indications that labour market actors, particularly companies, are starting to use NQFs should not be overemphasised. In most countries, this trend is at an early stage.

Education and training providers use NQFs the most. They design, review or renew qualifications, curricula or programmes based on NQF level descriptors. Providers also use NQF/EQF levels when promoting their programmes and qualifications to the public.

5. Impact of NQFs

Most countries agree that NQFs have made qualifications easier to understand. They enable individuals and employers to compare them and make informed decisions, for example on education progression and recruitment.

The impact of NQFs in promoting the learning outcomes approach is well documented. Further, NQFs support validation of non-formal and informal learning, increase trust in validation certificates, link formal and non-formal learning and strengthen the quality assurance in validation arrangements. Another crucial contribution is that NQFs offer a platform for stakeholder cooperation, reducing barriers between education and training subsystems, and building bridges with the labour market.

Figure 2. Main areas of impact of NQFs (2024)



Source: Cedefop.

6. NQFs in the Union of Skills

The Union of Skills aims to make skills and qualifications more transparent, trusted and easier to recognise, making learners' and workers' cross-border mobility easier. The EQF and NQFs contribute to these objectives. For example, when included in NQFs, qualifications acquired outside formal education become more visible and trusted, bridging different education subsystems. NQFs often facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications and strengthen their quality assurance. They are also a valuable tool for lifelong learning and for developing permeable education and training systems, making learner progression easier.