



Online workshop

Building the European map of qualifications – Latest NQF developments

Background paper

1. Objectives of the workshop

The workshop will offer a platform for policy-makers, stakeholders, experts, researchers and the broader public to engage in discussions on the latest NQF/EQF developments and trends across countries participating in the EQF process. Cedefop will present key findings of its policy brief [Building the European map of qualifications](#), aiming to collect reflections and ideas on the upcoming 2024 update of the [European inventory of NQFs](#). The workshop is an opportunity to exchange views on:

- the benefits of qualifications frameworks for citizens;
- the extent to which they accomplish their objectives and influence education and broader policies;
- success factors, persisting challenges and future priorities.

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](#)). The EQF has significantly contributed to increasing transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe. It has also triggered the development of learning-outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in most of the 41 countries participating in the EQF process ⁽¹⁾.

Cedefop has played a key role in EQF activities since initial work started in 2004. It has carried out [several comparative studies and analyses](#) on issues related to the implementation of the framework at EU, national and sectoral levels. The Centre cooperates closely with the European Commission and the Member States, and provides technical and analytical support to the EQF Advisory Group. Since 2009, Cedefop has carried out conceptual and technical work in analysing and monitoring NQF developments, and has published the [European inventory of NQFs](#) and several [focused studies, briefing notes and summaries](#).

In early 2024, the policy brief *Building a European qualifications map* was published, while the new edition of the [NQF online tool](#) was made available on Cedefop's [website](#). The 2022 country-specific reports included in the inventory and the information displayed in the new edition of the tool are based on data collected biennially by Cedefop together with the European Commission and the European Training Foundation (ETF) through the survey on implementation, use and impact of NQFs/EQF, in close cooperation with the countries participating in the EQF process. This work also feeds the [Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks](#).

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

3. Key NQF characteristics and trends in NQF implementation

Cedefop's [policy brief](#) on NQFs contributes to better understanding of NQFs in Europe by providing insights into their main characteristics, scope and coverage, along with a discussion on their impact and the extent to which they are used. The analysis is based primarily on information from Cedefop's European inventory of NQFs ⁽²⁾.

NQFs in Europe, when compared to qualifications frameworks from other regions of the world, can be considered as advanced frameworks; 60% of the 38 NQFs analysed are at operational stage ⁽³⁾ and almost 35% are at activation stage ⁽⁴⁾.

In most countries, overall responsibility for the NQF and its day-to-day implementation lies with the education ministry, an inter-ministerial structure, or an agency/institution. There is a clear trend among countries to assign overall responsibility for NQFs to ministries (24 NQFs), while agencies/institutions are responsible for day-to-day implementation (25 NQFs).

Almost all countries have reported that a variety of stakeholders is involved, to different degrees, in NQF implementation. Stakeholder involvement is usually achieved through two formal structures: sector (skills) councils (16 countries) and inter-stakeholder committees or councils (13 countries).

The most common success factor reported by countries is stakeholder engagement. NQF implementation has a long history of involving stakeholders, to different extents in each country. A solid legal basis and institutional structures are also often mentioned. However, Cedefop analysis has shown that countries can reach positive outcomes when NQF implementation is coherent with other relevant policies ⁽⁵⁾. There are many country-specific success factors. For example, in France connecting the NQF to the funding of training has made it much more visible and considerably increased its use by the public.

Figure 1. Success factors



Countries continue to face significant challenges, the most common being reaching the broader public. According to [UNESCO et. al. \(2023\)](#), this is a pressing challenge for the more mature frameworks. Countries mention that stakeholder involvement can also be a challenge: while in some cases their participation in NQF implementation should be increased, reaching a decision in others can prove time-consuming. Other challenges include the fragmentation of education and training, indicating NQF/EQF levels on qualifications, and further supporting validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The two most common future priorities are developing more comprehensive frameworks and raising awareness of the NQFs. The latter reflects the indications from countries about challenges, NQF dissemination and the evaluation of NQFs. National authorities also prioritise

⁽²⁾ For the analysis, Cedefop used data from the 38 country-specific reports available at the time the policy brief was produced.

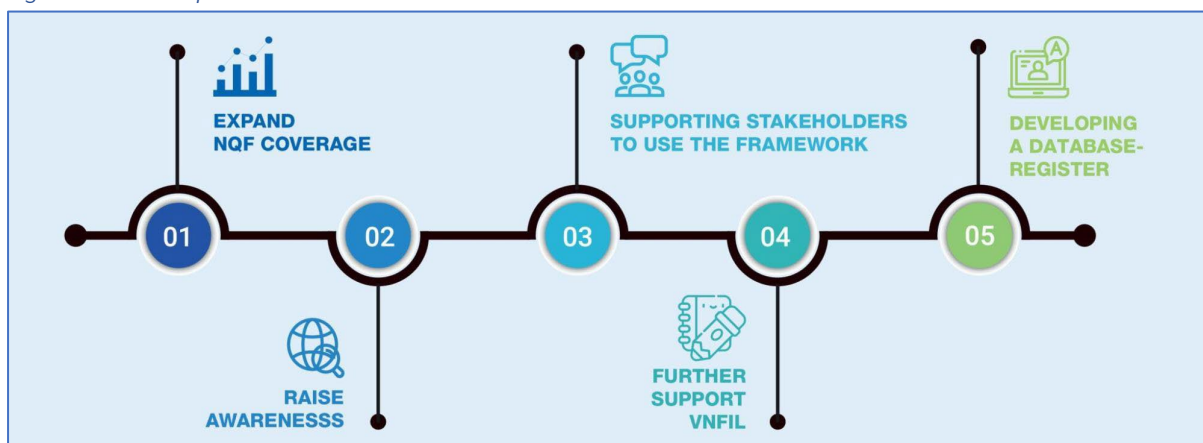
⁽³⁾ NQFs at this stage provide a map of levelled qualifications and a reference point for their development and review; NQF/EQF levels are indicated on qualifications, NQF databases are functional, and quality assurance mechanisms are in place ([Cedefop, 2021](#)).

⁽⁴⁾ In this stage implementation structures and the 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⁾ See more information on Cedefop work on policies promoting [transparency and transferability of learning outcomes and qualifications](#). A related publication will be available later in 2024.

the capacity building of stakeholders, further supporting validation procedures and developing an NQF database/register.

Figure 2. Future priorities



4. Structure of the workshop and main areas of focus

The workshop offers an opportunity to exchange views on the progress made in the EQF process over the past 2 years, and discuss success factors, persisting challenges and future priorities. It will adopt a global-oriented perspective, looking to the future.

Cedefop will present the new edition of its NQF online tool, along with key findings of our latest [analysis](#). This will be followed by an intervention from the European Commission reflecting on the major milestones in the implementation and development of the EQF process, as well as the future priorities. Other guest speakers will provide insights into the role that NQFs can play as a driver of change. The event will conclude with a panel discussion on NQF developments across the globe and the way forward.

A crucial part of the workshop is the parallel breakout sessions, where participants will have a chance to embark on fruitful discussions about three key topics related to NQF implementation. Cedefop aims to collect their views, as well as reflections and ideas on the upcoming 2024 update of the European inventory of NQFs.

4.1 Breakout session 1: End-user perspective – increasing citizens' awareness and use of NQFs

Increasing end users' awareness and use of NQFs is a priority in almost all countries participating in the EQF process. The first breakout session will start with a panel discussion among learner, employer and education-provider representatives, to shed light on what should be done to address the needs of end users. The panel will inspire a broader discussion among participants of this session. Areas of focus will include identifying what is working well for end users, the main benefits for them and the barriers they face, and good national practices in NQF dissemination.

Cedefop analysis has showed that awareness of the NQFs/EQF among citizens (learners, workers and jobseekers) has gradually increased. However, citizens often have the lowest level of awareness. Countries often report that learners mainly become aware of the NQFs/EQF through the mention of NQF/EQF levels on qualifications/certificates. Citizens most often use NQF/EQF levels to ease their international mobility. In countries that have a long-standing tradition of using qualifications frameworks, citizens show higher levels of awareness and use them in different ways.

The use of the NQFs/EQF among labour market stakeholders has also increased. Of the 38 NQFs reviewed, 24 are used by labour market stakeholders (employers, employer associations, trade unions, employment services); countries have also reported that NQF/EQF

levels are used in job ads and/or recruitment procedures. Their use, however, is not extensive. More steps need to be taken to increase the outreach of NQFs among employers.

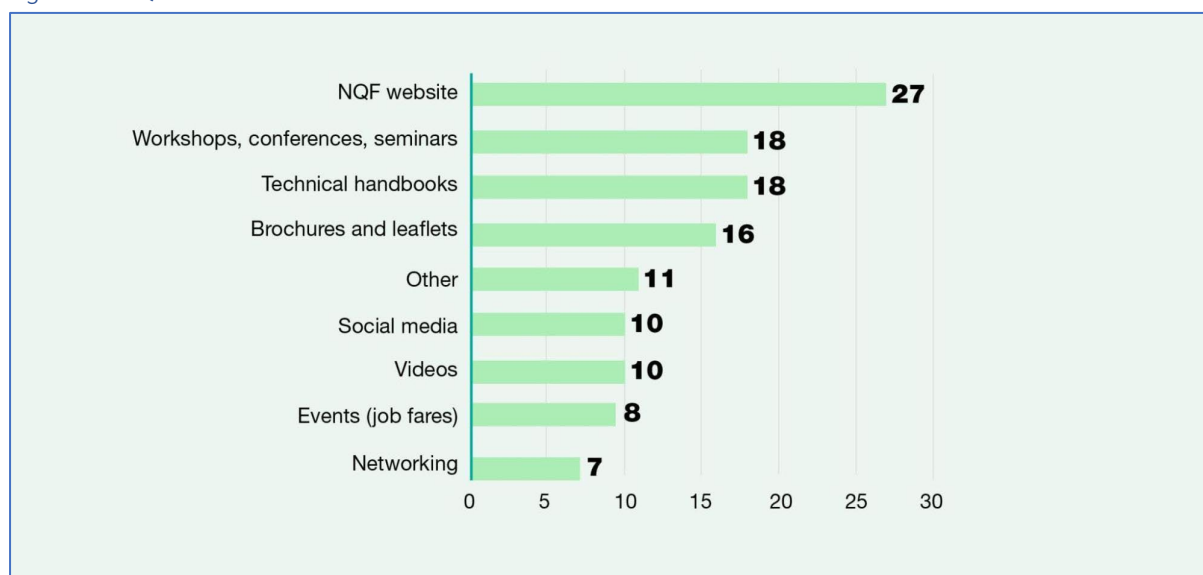
Main areas of NQF use

Countries most often use frameworks (and their learning outcomes descriptions) in the design, renewal and review of qualifications, and education and training programmes. Education and training providers often consider NQF level descriptors when developing their programmes. NQFs are also commonly used in quality assurance; 28 countries have reported that there is a link between the framework and quality assurance procedures. Most countries (22) use the NQF levels and level descriptors in recognition procedures of foreign qualifications, though this is done to varying degrees.

Raising awareness of NQFs

As European NQFs mature, countries increasingly focus on communicating their frameworks. In recent years there is a growing trend to target end users (e.g. learners, workers, jobseekers and employers). Countries use the NQF website as their main communication tool. Workshops, conferences and seminars, along with technical handbooks are commonly used, mostly targeting NQF developers and implementers. There is increasing use of social media and videos to promote NQFs. NQF databases can play a significant role in promoting transparency of qualifications and increasing awareness of NQFs. Countries have continued their effort to increase the number of qualification types that indicate levels. This is common practice, mainly in VET and higher education.

Figure 3. NQF communication channels



4.2 Breakout session 2: Developing inclusive NQFs

Countries have already started working in opening up their NQFs, while for many this is an important future priority and one of the areas that the EQF Advisory Group is planning to focus on in 2024-25. The second breakout session will allow three national experts to present their experiences and findings from actions carried out to create more inclusive NQFs. Subsequently, participants will be invited to contribute to the discussion with their views and examples on how to achieve comprehensive frameworks. Areas of focus will include: the procedures that countries follow and how they are quality-assured, the types of qualification they include, the needs that have triggered the opening-up of frameworks, the challenges countries are facing and the added value.

According to Cedefop's analysis since 2019, there has been considerable progress in including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training into NQFs. In 2022, more than half of the countries analysed (21 of 38) had opened their frameworks to them. NQF qualifications awarded outside formal education and training are diverse, varying substantially depending on the national context. They are often described as qualifications non-regulated by the education ministry and other ministries responsible for awarding qualifications. Another common distinction is between qualifications awarded by public or private providers; the latter are usually awarded outside the formal system.

The opening-up of NQFs does not only concern qualifications awarded outside formal education, but also types of qualification different from full formal ones. The most common types are partial qualifications, microcredentials, modules, units and international qualifications. These are often awarded outside formal education and training. For example, regarding microcredentials, our analysis has confirmed the findings of [Cedefop \(2023\)](#): although the term is seldom used as such, 13 countries have reported that at least one type of a levelled qualification can be considered as a microcredential.

4.3 Breakout session 3: Capturing the impact of NQFs

Capturing and measuring the impact of NQFs can be challenging; one reason is that frameworks need to be in place for a significant period of time to produce an impact. In 2017, Cedefop hosted the [peer-learning conference](#) 'Measuring and evaluating NQF impact', aiming to discuss if and/or how NQFs make a difference. Using the outcomes from this conference as a starting point, the objective of this workshop is to revitalise the discussion on how the impact of NQFs can be captured. To this end, the action already taken at national level can play an important role. This is why the last breakout session will start with the presentation of two national examples of how the impact of NQFs has been identified, and a broader reflection on how EQF/NQFs have impacted validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the second part of the session, participants will engage in an open dialogue and will try to identify ways, tools and possible indicators that could be used in capturing the impact of NQFs. Areas of focus could include: potential challenges in measuring NQF impact, the indicators countries use to measure it, and how we can work collaboratively to measure it.

Data from the NQF country-specific reports show that NQFs primarily support making education and training more transparent. Most countries reported that NQFs have increased the transparency and comparability of qualifications. This is mainly achieved as work on expanding the coverage of frameworks is progressing, the use of level descriptors has increased, and the public better understands how frameworks function. NQF databases also play a crucial role in increasing transparency and accessibility of qualifications. Cedefop analysis has also showed that NQF implementation can often have a positive impact on promoting the use of learning outcomes and promoting dialogue and cooperation between education and the labour market.

Figure 4. Main areas of impact of NQFs

