



# QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE 2018 DEVELOPMENTS

## Building on learning outcomes, promoting mutual trust

Building on the dynamic sparked by its 2008 recommendation on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF), the Council agreed on a revised recommendation in 2017 <sup>(1)</sup>. The intention was to strengthen EQF implementation across countries, systems and institutions, with a view to raising people’s ‘employability, (...) mobility and access to further education’. The European Commission, all EU Member States, a number of third countries, social partners and many other stakeholders <sup>(2)</sup> work together to ensure consistent, transparent and coordinated mapping (‘referencing’) of national qualifications frameworks to the EQF. The frameworks’ systematic use of learning outcomes fosters transparency and comparability of qualifications across countries and systems. There has been steady progress and, now, imagining European education and training systems without the frameworks has become quite impossible <sup>(3)</sup>.

### NQF DEVELOPMENT: STATUS

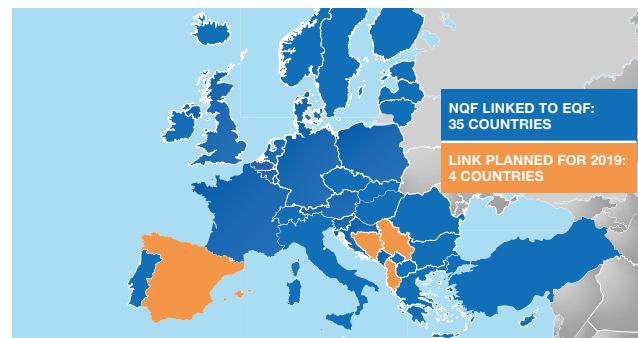
39 European countries <sup>(4)</sup> are currently developing 43 national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) which have reached different stages of implementation. Some countries have been or are revising their frameworks.

#### Frameworks adopted across Europe

Most countries have formally adopted NQFs, be it by a law, a decree, a regulation or a stakeholder agreement establishing a dialogue platform. Of the EU Member States, Spain has yet to finalise preliminary steps in readiness for adoption. Most recently, comprehensive

frameworks were adopted in Italy and Serbia (2018). Several countries are strengthening their NQF’s legal basis: Greece is preparing a presidential decree on NQF, Cyprus is considering the same. In Hungary, a government decree settling the operation, governance and quality assurance of an NQF is expected in 2019.

GRAPH 1. COUNTRIES HAVING LINKED THEIR NQFS TO THE EQF



#### Towards operational frameworks

Cedefop considers 17 frameworks to have reached an early operational stage <sup>(5)</sup>. The countries are laying the groundwork for their NQFs (databases, secondary legislation, communication, quality assurance), redesigning their qualifications based on learning outcomes and gradually populating their frameworks with them. Most recently, the first sets of qualifications have been included in the frameworks of Belgium (FR) and Liechtenstein. Preparatory work for implementation has been done in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy and Serbia.

Cedefop considers 21 national frameworks to have reached advanced operational status <sup>(6)</sup>. They have become an integrated part of national education and training systems and are based on learning outcomes. The challenge now is to strengthen stakeholder involvement, acceptance and ownership and especially end-users’ perception of them.

<sup>(1)</sup> <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ceead970-518f-11e7-a5ca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>(2)</sup> The EQF advisory group oversees EQF implementation at European level.

<sup>(3)</sup> See also the 10-year EQF anniversary event in 2018. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=88&langId=en&eventsId=1296&moreDocuments=yes&tableName=events&typeld=92>

<sup>(4)</sup> EU Member States, EEA countries (IS, LI, NO), candidate countries (AL, MO, MK, RS and TR), potential candidate countries (BA, XK), and CH.

<sup>(5)</sup> AT, BE (FR, DE), BG, HR, CY, EL, HU, XK, LI, LT, MO, MK, RO, SK, SE, TR.

<sup>(6)</sup> BE(FL), DK, CZ (partial framework for VET qualifications), EE, FI, FR, DE, IS, IE, LV, LU, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI, CH, UK (ENI, Wales and Scotland).

## Mapping NQFs to the EQF

35 countries have formally linked their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF <sup>(7)</sup>. The remaining four countries <sup>(8)</sup> are expected to follow in 2019. This means that the first stage of relating NQFs to the EQF is nearly completed. In recent years, four countries <sup>(9)</sup> have updated their referencing reports. The revised EQF recommendation states the need for continuous framework updates as qualification systems change.

### BOX 1. AN EXAMPLE: REVISION OF THE FRENCH NQF

The French qualifications framework was set up in 2002 and belongs to the first NQF generation. Its existence was closely linked to that of the National Committee for Vocational/professional Qualifications (CNCP: Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle) and of the national vocational/professional qualifications register. The latter was based on a five-level structure dating back to 1969, with level V being the lowest and level I the highest.

Given the subsequent evolution of the French qualification system, there was a need to update the level structure. In January 2019, the new framework (*Cadre National des Certifications Professionnelles*) was adopted, featuring an eight-level structure, closely aligned to that of the EQF. The former levels were referenced to EQF levels 3 to 8, while levels 1 and 2 are new. A new quadripartite skills agency, France Compétences, was set up, replacing a number of previous structures. It is responsible for steering the NQF and the qualification register and aims to simplify funding and governance of CVET and apprenticeships.

Implementation of the French NQF has been closely linked to the system for validating non-formal and informal learning (validation des acquis de l'expérience, VAE): all qualifications included in the national qualification register can be acquired through validation and the relevant VAE procedure is specified for each of them.

## Continuing quest for clarity: monitoring and evaluating NQF implementation

To reflect developments in national systems, more and more countries are evaluating and, in some cases, revising their NQFs. Considering recommendations of a recent NQF evaluation, the Netherlands plan to adopt a legal proposal in 2020 to strengthen their framework's legal basis and reinforce stakeholder communication.

Recent times have demonstrated a cyclical dynamic in which NQFs are a never-ending story: they need to

evolve constantly to be relevant and add value for end users. Their purpose and their use are always up for change, hence the need for periodical evaluation to gather evidence on their changing nature with a view to informing their development.

Most countries have been assigning NQF and EQF levels to qualifications they award. Trusted national and European levels allow for comparison of different qualifications, aiding transfer and recognition. To strengthen mutual understanding of, and trust in, qualifications, countries are discussing how to improve the referencing process, considering the increasingly robust implementation of learning outcomes.

## NQFS' GROWING SCOPE AND IMPACT

### Comprehensive frameworks gaining ground

European countries tend to use their frameworks to create comprehensive maps of qualifications in all sectors (VET, higher education, general education, adult learning). Many frameworks are being opened up to include qualifications awarded outside formal education and to help validate non-formally and informally acquired skills and competences. This is considered crucial to policies fostering lifelong learning and progression through different pathways, an underlying principle of most European NQFs. 36 out of 39 countries are working towards (ideally) comprehensive frameworks, while two countries, the Czech Republic and Switzerland, operate separate frameworks for vocational/professional and HE qualifications <sup>(10)</sup>.

Austria illustrates how a framework can be developed taking a step-by-step approach. Initially, higher education and VET qualifications at levels 4 and 5 were to be included, starting with school-based and apprenticeship qualifications. In 2018 examples of master craftsperson qualifications were added and mapped to EQF level 6. The new legal acts regulating VET qualifications such as Meister or Ingenieur refer to the NQF, the latter actually being directly inspired by it.

Italy passed a law in 2013 establishing a national system for the certification of competences, comprising a repository of national and regional qualifications described in learning outcomes. The comprehensive Italian NQF was adopted in January 2018. It comprises

<sup>(7)</sup> AT, BE (FL and WA), BG, HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, MK, FR, DE, EL, HU, IS, IE, IT, XK, LV, LI, LT, LU, MT, ME, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SK, SL, SE, CH, TR and the UK (England, Scotland and Wales).

<sup>(8)</sup> AL, BA, RS and ES.

<sup>(9)</sup> BE (FL), EE, MT (four times), and UK (Scotland).

<sup>(10)</sup> In the UK (ENI), the new framework is broader in scope than the previous one, covering all regulated academic and vocational qualifications. Levels 5 to 8 compare to those of the HE frameworks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish and Welsh frameworks are comprehensive. Some countries are putting efforts into the integration of higher education (HE) qualifications.

es 8 levels and covers general, HE and VET qualifications awarded at national or regional level. Meanwhile, Italy has already mapped more than 4 000 regional qualifications to be included in the national framework.

### Including qualifications outside formal education

To draw a comprehensive map of their qualification landscapes, countries <sup>(11)</sup> are opening up their frameworks to include qualifications designed and awarded by private companies and learning providers, such as adult learning providers. The idea is to increase overall transparency of these qualifications, to clarify their relationship to formal qualifications and allow citizens better use of them for lifelong learning and career development. However, this creates several challenges related to their format and quality, their coherence with the learning outcomes-based NQF and EQF descriptors, and the need to build trust.

The French NQF, an inclusive framework, comprises both qualifications issued by the State and private ones. The decision to include a qualification in the national register is based on its labour market value and quality.

The Netherlands have a large private education and training market with more than 1.3 million participants and more than 12 000 providers. 84% of all adult learning is private. Including a private qualification in the Dutch NQF gives it a strong quality label, boosting its comparability and value and people's trust in it. There has been a growing number of applications from non-formal education providers, indicative of the framework's visibility. By February 2019, 65 non-regulated qualifications were assigned NQF levels.

Poland has created a comprehensive NQF underpinned by an integrated qualification register comprising all types of qualifications. The levelling of 'market qualifications' has recently begun. By the beginning of 2019, 41 of these were included in the national register, with many more to come by 2020.

Austria and Germany are conducting pilot procedures on the inclusion of qualifications outside formal education. Ireland and Denmark have adopted a legal basis to do so.

### Integrating international qualifications

The emergence of international qualifications reflects the globalisation of European economies and labour markets. The EQF acts as a translation device for all types and levels of qualification, including those award-

ed by international bodies. It improves opportunities for holders of such qualifications to enter European labour markets or education and training systems. However, to ensure that the EQF supports lifelong learning, mobility and employability in practice, consistent levelling of international qualifications through the different NQFs is crucial. Available data suggests that, in 2018, nine countries had national procedures in place or under development for including international qualifications in their NQFs <sup>(12)</sup>.

## BRINGING FRAMEWORKS TO THE FRONT OFFICE

### Public perception and stakeholder use

To be of real value to citizens, frameworks need to become more visible to them. This can only be achieved if education and labour market actors increasingly use the frameworks in their daily work, turning them into a tangible reality for end-users. In recent years, several countries <sup>(13)</sup> have monitored and evaluated their frameworks, to sharpen their relevance and visibility and better steer their further implementation.

#### BOX 2. HIGH PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE MALTESE NQF

A 2016 survey revealed that nearly 70% of the population is aware of the existence of the Maltese NQF, with even higher levels for those making active use of it. The public body responsible for the framework has teamed up with employers and created a qualification recognition information centre to encourage its use. The country's main job portal JobsPlus uses the framework for issuing work permits, and NQF levels are used in incentive schemes such as scholarships and tax rebates. Employers use the framework for worker recruitment and career development, public bodies specify NQF levels in job vacancies. Awareness campaigns via social media, posters and videos have been addressed to public and private education institutions, local councils and other government bodies.

### Qualifications bearing NQF/EQF levels

30 countries now indicate EQF/NQF levels in new qualification documents and/or Europass supplements <sup>(14)</sup> 24 have included levels in their national qualifications databases <sup>(15)</sup>. Several countries, such as Estonia, Germany and Slovenia, indicate NQF/EQF levels in all qualifications documents, vocational and general. In most, however, much progress has been made in vocational education and training (IVET and/or CVET) and to a

<sup>(12)</sup> BG, FR, LI, NL, PT, SI, SK, SE, UK.

<sup>(13)</sup> EE, IE, LV, MT, NL, PL, SI, UK.

<sup>(14)</sup> AT, BE (FL, FR), CZ, DK, EE, FR, DE, EL, HU, IE, XK, LV, LT, MT, ME, NL, MK, PL, PO, RO, SI, SK, TR, and the UK. Currently; some countries only include NQF levels.

<sup>(15)</sup> AT, BE (FL, FR), CZ, DK, EE, FR, DE, EL, HU, IE, XK, LV, LT, MT, ME, NL, MK, PL, PO, RO, SI, SK, TR, and the UK. Currently; some countries only include NQF levels.

<sup>(11)</sup> Including NL, SI, SE and UK-Scotland.

lesser extent in general education qualifications. The inclusion of NQF/EQF levels in higher education qualifications has so far been limited, with the exception of the Europass diploma supplement. This reflects the fact that it is normally up to the awarding (autonomous) institution to decide on inclusion of NQF/EQF levels.

### Communication and outreach

Some countries have taken steps to promote awareness of their NQFs. Ireland has carried out information campaigns targeted at education and training providers and guidance professionals who, in turn, promote NQF awareness with learners and other end users. A 2019 communication campaign will focus on awarding bodies, researchers, legislators and social partners.

#### BOX 3. TARGETED NQF PROMOTION: THE CASE OF SCOTLAND

The Scottish framework is one of the oldest comprehensive frameworks in Europe, featuring 12 levels and underpinning all government policies. It includes all types of qualification, around 11 500 so far, of which around 1 000 belong to trade unions, employers and professional bodies.

Its visibility is ensured as its levels are indicated in all qualifications documents awarded. Besides its website, social media coverage and frequent presentations at events, the framework is promoted by a School ambassador programme which trains teachers and senior pupils to cascade information about it to other teachers, pupils and parents. NQF levels are embedded in school curricula and national training programmes. Regular use by guidance and counselling practitioners also promotes the framework's visibility and it enjoys increasing prominence in the college sector. In 2015/16 more than 4 000 college students were geared to articulation routes between higher national qualifications and degree level courses thanks to the framework.

The oldest frameworks in Europe are the Irish, French and UK frameworks (Scotland and Wales); these have made progress in becoming 'allrounders'. They have become permanent features of national qualifications systems, underpinning all education and training policies. They have integrated all types of qualifications, public and private, and accommodate non-formal and informal learning. While classification and transparency remain important objectives, they aid access to study or employment. Frameworks in the UK and Ireland are widely known to end-users: their levels feature on diplomas and certificates, they are used for guidance, recruitment and HR development, and they support the recognition of foreign qualifications and of prior learning.

### Securing NQFs' continuing relevance

There is a general aspiration across countries to press on with developing and implementing frameworks to maximise their potential. The frameworks have helped more consistent use of learning outcomes and review and renewal of qualifications, for example as 'educational qualifications' <sup>(16)</sup> at levels 1 to 4 in Belgium (FL) and general education qualifications in Lithuania. They have promoted stakeholder cooperation across the worlds of education and work, improved quality and relevance of qualifications, permeability of systems and pathways, parity of esteem for VET qualifications, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

#### BOX 4. QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS AROUND THE GLOBE



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In recent years, qualifications frameworks around the world have developed rapidly. The fourth edition of the Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks (forthcoming) will include more than 100 national and seven regional frameworks as well as selected cross-cutting themes.

Many of these frameworks have been deepened and widened since 2017, bearing witness to social, economic and technological changes, globalisation of labour markets, migration, and emergence of digital credentials, all posing new challenges to recognition of qualifications and skills.

Cedefop; ETF; Unesco; Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (forthcoming). *Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2019*.

Qualifications frameworks have found their place in the European education and training landscape: their future role will depend on continuous updates and improvements and their ability to promote citizens' learning and employability.

<sup>(16)</sup> Qualifications acquired within the Flemish formal education system.