



Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation

Final report

17 October 2013

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The conclusions, recommendations and opinions in this report are those of the authors and they do not necessarily represent the views of the European Commission

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Summary statement

This evaluation report provides an overview of progress made in the implementation of the EQF Recommendation between 2008 and 2012. The objective of this evaluation was to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, impact and sustainability of the EQF. This report is one of many contributions to the Commission's report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the EQF Recommendation.

Although only four countries achieved the first EQF milestone (relate their national qualifications system to the EQF - by the end of 2010) and six achieved the second one (ensure that all new qualification documents refer to the appropriate EQF level – by the end of 2012), by the end of May 2013, 20 countries had related their national qualifications system to the EQF. Participating countries are more than ever aiming for qualifications systems that are more transparent and clear and their commitment to the EQF objectives remains strong beyond the target dates set in the EQF Recommendation.

The EQF advisory group has been a key actor in the implementation of the EQF, in particular as it effectively provided “soft control/guidance” of national referencing processes. The implementation has also been effectively supported by financial support to EQF pilot projects and support to EQF National Contact Points in participating countries.

Considering the stage of implementation of the EQF Recommendation, evidence of its outcomes and impact on national education and training systems in participating countries, on the use of learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning has been scarce so far. This means that the implementation needs to progress further before this impact becomes visible.

This evaluation recommends that, in the future:

- *The effort towards reaching the two EQF objectives should be intensified and remain a priority, even if the target dates have passed.*
- *Support to the EQF implementation – through the EQF advisory group, the EQF NCPs and their activities (including peer learning activities and projects) are more than ever needed.*
- *Cooperation with other mobility and transparency tools should be reinforced so as to ensure that the EQF is implemented in coherence with the objectives of these tools and that they all contribute to wider EU objectives of mobility and employability, as part of the EU2020 and ET2020.*
- *The EQF is already widely considered a reference tool in Europe and beyond – the main features of the EQF should remain stable so that this influence continues and expands, giving the EQF greater visibility.*
- *Data about implementation of the EQF should be continuously collected and analysed, and outcomes and impacts of the EQF Recommendations evaluated again, once the implementation has progressed further*

The rationale, underpinning data and analysis behind these key messages can be found in the core of this report.

Recommendations

Referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF (Recommendations 1, 2, 4, 9 and 10) - The Commission should urge countries that have not referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF to reach this milestone; and invite those that have already referenced to regularly inform the EQF Advisory Group about how its comments have been addressed and update their referencing report as implementation progresses. The Commission should support these national developments via peer learning, exchange of views, as well as through revising existing and preparing further EQF guidance documents that address the key challenges of referencing and providing financial support from Erasmus+.

Making EQF levels visible in certificates, diplomas and Europass supplements (Recommendations 3) – The Commission should support countries in making quick progress in indicating EQF levels in all new certificates, diplomas and Europass supplements.

Making the most of a stable framework and adapting it to new needs (Recommendations 8, 14 and 18) – The Commission should seek to maintain the number of levels and learning outcomes descriptors and main features of the EQF in order to ensure the long-term stability of the tool. However, it should propose solutions to the EQF AG to address the challenge of linking international qualifications to the EQF.

Empowering stakeholders in implementing the EQF (Recommendations: 7, 11, 12 and 13) – While maintaining its working methods, the Commission should consult the EQF AG on the necessity of re-establishing a steering bureau. The Commission should further make increased efforts, including through financial support from Erasmus+, to support National Coordination Points in carrying out their tasks defined in the Recommendation, in particular increasing stakeholders awareness, understanding and interest in the EQF.

Gathering empirical evidence about progress in the implementation of the EQF (Recommendations 5, 12 and 17) – The Commission should assess the progress made in the implementation of the learning outcomes approach in Europe. Furthermore, the Commission should regularly assess the overall impact of the EQF.

Increasing synergies between European transparency tools and enhancing the contribution of the EQF to wider EU goals (Recommendations 6, 15 and 16) – Given the potential contribution of the EQF to wider EU goals, including ET2020, the Commission and its services should ensure better cooperation and increased synergies between the development and implementation of European policies and transparency tools that aim to promote lifelong learning and mobility. European funding programmes, in particular Erasmus+, should also support activities boosting synergies between these transparency tools at European, national and regional levels. The Commission should remind national and regional authorities and other stakeholders of their responsibility for ensuring coherence of their actions and policies with regards to qualifications, and the implementation of national qualifications frameworks and the EQF.

1 Introduction

In 2008, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (the EQF Recommendation)¹. The EQF has the objective to create a common reference framework for qualifications systems in Europe, and therein to facilitate comparison between different qualifications systems and levels throughout Europe.

The EQF Recommendation invited the Commission to "assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders² concerned, the action taken in response to this Recommendation, including the remit and duration of the advisory group, and, by 23 April 2013, report to the European Parliament and to the Council on the experience gained and implications for the future, including, if necessary, the possible review and revision of this Recommendation". This report - the final version of the external evaluation of the EQF Recommendation - provides input to the Commission's report to the European Parliament and the Council.

This evaluation was contracted³ to ICF GHK under the framework contract for evaluation, evaluation-related services and support for impact assessment⁴, in consortium with Technopolis Ltd. The evaluation started with the signature of the contract by both parties on 18 July 2012 and ran for nine months.

In terms of scope, the evaluation covered the period 2008-2012⁵, the 33 countries involved during this period in the EQF initiative⁶ and activities foreseen in the EQF Recommendation at national and European level. The evaluation also covers other aspects of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation, such as synergies with other EU tools aiming to contribute to transparency, mobility and lifelong learning, and the use and impact of the EQF Recommendation in cooperation with third countries regarding education and training. This evaluation focuses on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, impact and sustainability of the EQF.

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 introduces the EQF Recommendation, its rationale and logic;
- Chapters 3 to 8 present the evaluation findings in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance, impacts and sustainability of the EQF;
- Chapter 9 presents the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation.

The terms of reference, data collection tools and case studies are provided in the Annex.

¹ RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01)

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=oj:c:2008:111:0001:0007:en:pdf>

² In this report, by stakeholder we understand public (national, regional and local) authorities, social partners (employers representatives and trade unions), sector organisation, chambers of commerce and industry and craft, education and training providers, learners, etc.

³ Contract number EAC 2012-0360

⁴ Framework contract number EAC/50/2009

⁵ from the start of the implementation of the EQF initiative (2008) until the signature of the contract referring to this evaluation assignment

⁶ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Republic of Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and United Kingdom

2 Background

This chapter introduces the EQF Recommendation. It sets out the rationale for the EQF Recommendation and summarises key milestones in its development and adoption.

2.1 The EQF at a glance

The EQF is a European instrument which aims to enable the comparison of qualifications and qualification levels across European countries in order to encourage mobility and lifelong learning. It relies on an overarching framework to which national qualification levels can be related, thus facilitating comparison. Initially, the 27 Member States, Iceland, Norway and two candidate countries participated. In 2011-2012, Liechtenstein and Switzerland joined the process and, in 2013, Serbia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro also joined, bringing the number of participating countries to 36.

It is designed to accommodate all types and forms of qualifications (general, higher, vocational, adult education and training), as well as those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, recognising that qualifications can be achieved through different pathways.

The EQF is structured around eight qualification levels, which are described through learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence). The use of learning outcomes is a novelty compared to other pre-existing systems to compare education and training systems, such as ISCED⁷, which are predominantly based on types and duration of education and training pathways and the ways in which learner progression is managed.

The EQF Recommendation contained the following main features:

- A set of key definitions that underpin the EQF (e.g. definition of the terms 'qualification' and 'learning outcomes');
- The EQF structure, including the eight levels and their descriptors;
- Common principles for quality assurance in higher education and VET to be used to underpin the EQF implementation;
- A set of Recommendations to the Member States about how they should use the EQF;
- Definition of the European Commission's role in the process of EQF implementation, as well as the main features of and the mandate for the EU-level governance process (the role of the advisory group).

The Recommendation called on Member States to:

- Designate a National Coordination Point (NCP);
- Reference their national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010;
- Indicate the EQF level on all newly-issued certificates/documents of qualification delivered to individuals as of 2012.

2.2 Why the EQF?

This section sets out the rationale for EQF development in terms of the needs that it was anticipated to address.

The EQF is an instrument designed and implemented at European level through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). It builds on the work done in the 1990's to support transparency and comparability of qualifications in the EU with a view to support qualification recognition in the context of mobility of workers and learners.

The EQF is one of the initiatives that aimed to answer a need for improved recognition of qualifications to make mobility happen in practice and make lifelong learning a reality. One solution was proposed in the early 2000's through the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications (2005/36). This addressed an identified need for more a uniform, transparent and flexible system of qualification recognition to support labour mobility in the context of the European single market⁸. However, the

⁷ ISCED aims to help compare education systems with those of other countries but also to benchmark progress towards national and international goals. (UNESCO)

⁸ Presidency Conclusions Stockholm European Council 23 And 24 March 2001

Directive focuses on professional qualifications (i.e. those qualifications giving access to a specific occupation) and is only concerned with regulated professions. There was still a need for wider recognition of learning and qualifications beyond the regulated professions.

The work on the EQF started in parallel to the development of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) under the Copenhagen process. However, it became quickly obvious that that EQF should be a cross-sectoral tool (covering all forms and levels of qualifications). Consequently, in 2004 the EQF was integrated among the actions under the Education and Training 2010 work programme⁹. The instrument was designed based on the work of a technical working group composed of experts and Member States representatives. It was also based on studies commissioned by Cedefop.

Early EQF development was influenced by European cooperation in higher education under the Bologna Process. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the overarching qualifications framework of three cycles for higher education was adopted in 2005, with the objective of having countries developing national qualifications frameworks that are compatible with this overarching framework (see section 2.3.2).

A first proposal for the EQF was prepared in 2005 and was submitted for public consultation. Many countries organised national consultations with stakeholders to submit a single well-informed position to the European Commission. In most cases, this national consultation exercise and its results became, later on, the basis for the national decisions on the implementation of the EQF. After the consultation process, the Commission proposal for the EQF was submitted for discussion with the Council and the Parliament. This resulted in the adoption of the EQF Recommendation in 2008.

2.3 EQF objectives in the context of wider European and EU goals

This section places the EQF in the context of wider European and EU initiatives developed in parallel to the EQF.

The general objective of the EQF is to promote lifelong learning, increase employability, mobility and the social integration of workers and learners. This general objective has to be considered in the context of wider EU goals, such as those outlined in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (hereafter ET2020) and in the Europe 2020 strategy (EU2020), which are introduced below (2.3.1). The section also introduces the QF-EHEA and the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications, which were introduced prior to the EQF but are inter-related to it (2.3.2).

The relevance, coherence and impact of the EQF in relation to these initiatives will be further discussed in chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this report.

2.3.1 The EQF in the context of EU 2020 and ET 2020

The current global economic crisis has spurred Europe into action by reaffirming the need for the EU and individual Member States to coordinate their efforts in order to reach shared goals. The global downturn reinforces the need for cooperation among Member States in order to address the crisis and to ensure longer-term sustainable growth in the EU. By acting collectively, the Union can survive the current crisis and come through this period in a stronger position. **The Europe 2020 Strategy (EU 2020)** supports this momentum by formulating a response to the crisis which fosters “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”¹⁰. It provides a comprehensive vision for Europe over the next ten years and builds upon the experience of the previous decade under the Lisbon Strategy by maintaining momentum towards creating the most “competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world”¹¹.

⁹ The 2004 Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe calls for the development of the EQF <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/04/st06/st06905.en04.pdf>

¹⁰ Communication from the Commission, ‘Europe 2020, A strategy for smart and inclusive growth’, COM(2010) 2020, March 2010 <http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

¹¹ Presidency conclusions of the Lisbon Council of 23-24 March 2000. European Council http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm

EU 2020 was adopted by the European Council in June 2010. It recognises investment in education and training as a priority in order to achieve its main aim of accelerating economic recovery in Europe. “Youth on the Move” and “An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs” are the two (out of seven) flagship initiatives under EU 2020 that are most pertinent to education, training and qualifications:

- Youth on the Move aims to ‘unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union’. It underlines the need for intertwined cooperation between education and training policies, while aiming to increase the share of citizens with tertiary or equivalent qualifications.
- The Agenda for New Skills and Jobs prioritises ‘flexicurity’ and places emphasis on the role of education and employment policies, both separately and combined, in addressing the adverse impact of the economic crisis on employment and in securing growth and competitiveness in the long term by effectively matching skills to jobs.

Education and training policies are central to the Europe 2020 Strategy as it is acknowledged that the “way to go out of the crisis must mean moving to a more competitive economy, which is knowledge-based, inclusive and sustainable, giving good employment opportunities for women and men”¹².

Education and Training 2010 (ET 2010) and **Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020)** are policy responses to broader overarching European Strategies (the Lisbon Strategy during the period 2000-2010, and the Europe 2020 Strategy during the period 2010-2020). ET 2020 defines a clear work programme with overall strategic objectives to address challenges in the areas of education and training. It was adopted in May 2009 by the European Council.

The design of the EQF took place in parallel with the planning and adoption of ET 2020. ET 2020 sets four strategic objectives. The first objective is to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality. The development of national qualifications frameworks linked to the EQF, as well as more flexible learning pathways, is explicitly stated as part of this objective. The other objectives of ET2020 are: improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Member States also agreed five benchmarks under the framework for ET2020. Two of these benchmarks are particularly relevant to the EQF:

- Adult participation in lifelong learning - With a view to increasing the participation of adults in lifelong learning, particularly that of the low-skilled: *By 2020, an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning.*
- Tertiary-level attainment - Given the increasing demand for higher education attainment, and whilst acknowledging the equal importance of vocational education and training: *By 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%.*

These policy developments also support the development of learning outcomes and competence-based EU instruments, quality assurance instruments at European level, and promoting the validation of informal and non-formal learning. These wider policy dimensions are directly relevant to the EQF and are discussed in turn below.

Learning outcomes-based EU instruments

Other learning outcomes-based EU instruments implemented via the open method of coordination include the ECTS, ECVET and the European key competences framework.

The **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)** is an instrument for credit transfer and accumulation in higher education developed in 1989 in the context of the SOCRATES Erasmus Programme. It is based on the principle that higher education programmes are designed in terms of components (or modules), using learning outcomes. The components are quantified using credit points, which express typical student workload. Each component/module is assessed and can be transferred and accumulated. The ECTS implementation is supported by the European Commission, which established a network of Recognition experts¹³ and developed the labels to

¹² Council of the European Union Conclusions, June 2010, ‘*New Skills for New Jobs, the way forward*’.

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/114962.pdf

¹³ for ECTS and Diploma Supplement

recognise excellent application of the ECTS and Diploma Supplement systems. The Commission has also supported the design and updates of guidance tools for the implementation of ECTS, such as the ECTS user guide.

The **European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)** is an instrument for credit transfer and accumulation applicable to VET. Its development started in 2002 and approval to legislation was agreed between the European Parliament and National governments in 2009¹⁴. An experimental phase was launched between 2009 and 2012 and Member states recently entered the phase of the gradual implementation of ECVET (planned until 2014 where a possible revision of the Recommendation might occur based on the analysis of the experimentations)¹⁵. ECVET is based on the accumulation of units or learning outcomes. These are part of qualifications but not necessarily directly parts of the education and training programmes. Units are also quantified but the credit points express the relative weight of units within qualifications (not the workload). Like in ECTS, the units are assessed and when the assessment is positive they can be accumulated and transferred. Both ECVET and ECTS are underpinned by the principle that qualifications are based on learning outcomes.

The ECVET governance structure is composed of various actors, namely¹⁶:

- The Directors General for VET (DGVT) and the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT), which are non-formal consultative bodies composed of members of government, trade unions and employers' organisations of each country, and provide feedback to the European Commission, twice a year, on VET and ECVET European developments.
- The ECVET support team, appointed by the European Commission, assists the European Commission in the implementation of ECVET and provides support to the Member States in their implementation of ECVET as well as to other members of the European ECVET network (e.g. CEDEFOP, ETF, etc.).

The **European key competences framework**, introduced as part of the 2006 Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning¹⁷, identifies a set of eight competences considered necessary for individuals to succeed in the context of society, the family or the labour market. The eight competences constitute a European reference for policy makers, stakeholders and practitioners in their efforts to improve the quality of education and the learning opportunities for all individuals. The key competences framework highlights the importance of ensuring that education and training systems enable people to develop the right set of competences, which can be developed through a variety of learning activities (which may or may not be related to a specific subject, and which can be learnt through school-based education and extra-curricular activities). The key competences framework therefore supports lifelong learning reform through a competence-based approach, in line with the learning outcomes approach promoted in the context of the EQF. The Commission supported policy development at European and national level through the establishment of the cluster and then a Thematic Working Group on Key Competences, including the design of policy and guidance material.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

These instruments – ECTS, ECVET and the European key competences framework - have contributed to the development of validation of non-formal and informal learning, together with the introduction of Common European principles on validation¹⁸. The need to validate the learning outcomes of all citizens, in order to increase employability and inclusiveness, led the Commission to propose specific next steps in this field. A Council Recommendation was adopted in December 2012.

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ecvet_en.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.ecvet-team.eu/en/content/gradual-implementation-ecvet>

¹⁶ European ECVET network website, consulted on 28 June, at <http://www.ecvet-team.eu/en/content/ecvet-network-governance>.

¹⁷ RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC)

¹⁸ Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, of 18 May 2004, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/informal/validation2004_en.pdf

It invites Member States to create, by 2018, the necessary mechanisms and systems in order to validate learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning.

Building on the EQF legacy, validation of such types of learning will also allow for recognition of partial and full qualifications. This is expected to facilitate the access to employment of a significant number of younger and older unemployed people, while providing the incentive for individuals to undertake further learning in the future.

Quality assurance instruments at European level

Quality assurance instruments at European level mainly relate to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in Higher education and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET).

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, adopted in 2003 by European representative bodies of quality assurance agencies (ENQA), students (ESU), universities (EUA) and other higher education institutions (EURASHE). The ESG support a common approach to quality assurance in higher education based on actions at three levels:

- Internal (institutional): Higher education institutions are expected to have a quality assurance approach that covers the key issues described in the ESG (for example programme design, student assessment, learning resources);
- External (accreditation process): Bodies that accredit higher education institutions and programmes are expected to follow certain common quality assurance procedures in doing so (for example periodic review);
- Quality assurance of accreditation bodies: Accreditation bodies should apply quality assurance processes to their own work and should be subject to peer-review.

Following the adoption of the ESG, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was founded, with the objective to increase the transparency of quality assurance in higher education across Europe.

The **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET)** is an approach applicable to quality assurance of VET systems. It goes beyond the issue of quality assuring providers/institutions to include aspects of VET policy, such as policy planning, use of indicators at system level and the role of stakeholders. EQAVET promotes an approach to quality assurance based on the quality cycle: planning; implementation; evaluation; and review. These four phases are expected to be applied to all aspects of VET systems.

The EQF has to be underpinned by quality assurance at EU level and at national level. NQFs are implied to have clear quality assurance processes. EQAVET and ESG are both expected to support national level quality assurance. As the EQF aims to cover all education sub-systems, it arguably supports a more consistent approach to quality assurance. In the long-term, the credibility of EQF referencing might also be said to depend on effective quality assurance being established at national level. There is therefore arguably a mutual dependency between the EQF in the long-term and initiatives to support better quality assurance of qualifications, institutions and systems.

2.3.2 The EQF in the context of other qualification-related developments

Two important policy developments are also worth introducing when setting the context for EQF development because they both precede and influence the EQF:

- The Professional Qualifications Directive facilitates the recognition of professional qualifications, with the aim to ensure free movement of workers.
- The Bologna Process and, in particular, the development of a qualifications framework for higher education.

Professional Qualifications Directive

The system of recognition for professional qualifications¹⁹ is considered to be a key action for improving mobility of EU citizens in the European Single Market. As such, it is closely related to the EQF objectives. The legislation on the recognition of professional qualifications has been developed in order to respond to four objectives: labour mobility; support for professionals coming from a non-

¹⁹ 2005/36/EC

regulating Member State and interested in establishment in a Member State where the profession is regulated; cross-border provision of services on a temporary and occasional basis; and last, but not least, the legislation also aims to balance the need for mobility with legitimate public interest in the high quality of services and protection of consumers and patients.

The Professional Qualifications Directive, adopted in 2005, was under revision at the time of this evaluation. The Directive uses a different system of levels to the EQF. Crucially, the system is input-based (with levels determined by length and institution of study) rather than outcomes-based like the EQF. The 2005 Directive foresaw three systems for the recognition of qualifications²⁰:

- automatic recognition for professions for which the minimum training conditions have been harmonised (health professionals, architects, veterinary surgeons);
- the general system for other regulated professions;
- recognition on the basis of professional experience for certain professional activities.

Its implementation has been evaluated in preparation of this revision, and, in this context, a study evaluating the Professional Qualifications Directive against recent educational reforms in EU Member States²¹ investigated the recognition of qualifications across member states specifically in the context EQF levels and the Bologna degree cycles. It directly addressed the relationship between qualifications and access to professions and occupations and how this is evolving over time. This has provided a detailed understanding of how this varies across the EU and by profession, as well as some of the challenges in using qualifications for regulatory purposes.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention

In terms of recognition, the EQF Recommendation also builds on work carried out in preparation for the Lisbon Recognition Convention²², signed in 1997, which facilitates the recognition of higher education qualifications in Europe (including those giving access to higher education). The Lisbon Recognition Convention paves the way to recognition of higher-level qualifications and aims to make recognition an expectation rather than an exception.

The Bologna Process and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area

The development of European higher education in the last decade has been strongly marked by the intergovernmental Bologna process, which was launched by the Ministers of Education of 30 European countries in 1999.

The Bologna process has since become a major European higher education reform process. In addition to covering 47 European countries, countries outside of Europe have demonstrated an interest in the process. The main objective of the Bologna process has been to create a unified European Higher Education Area with more compatible and comparable higher education systems to facilitate mobility between European countries, to improve the employability of students, and to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of its higher education both within Europe as well as in relation to other countries. To reach these objectives, the Bologna process has concentrated on reforms in three main areas: degree reform; quality assurance and recognition of qualifications; and periods of study.

One of the core initiatives of the Bologna process is the implementation of a three-cycle structure of higher education qualifications in the participating countries. The three cycles are described using learning outcomes cycle descriptors – compatible with level descriptors in the EQF, but based on somewhat different terminology to that of the EQF.

This qualifications framework – Qualifications Framework in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) concerns only higher education qualifications. It was adopted in 2005 and countries were expected to develop higher education qualifications frameworks and self-certify these to the QF-EHEA. The fact that it is based on self-certification is a major difference with the EQF. The self-certification is a process through which the competent national body/bodies shall certify the

²⁰ Source: http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/directive_in_practice/index_en.htm

²¹ http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/docs/policy_developments/final_report_en.pdf

²² Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region
Lisbon, 11.IV.1997

compatibility of the national framework with the European framework²³. It does not foresee presentation and discussion of the report with a group of peers and expert, as it is the case in the EQF referencing system. At European level, QF-EHEA implementation is coordinated by the Council of Europe because the instrument covers all countries in the Council of Europe (i.e. beyond those taking part in ET 2020).

After the adoption of the EQF, countries increasingly started to consider developing one comprehensive qualifications framework integrating the higher education framework. Some countries also carried out a single referencing for both EQF and QF-EHEA. The Bologna Process also supports the learning outcomes approach, with the use and transfer of credits to support mobility and recognition in higher education (based on ECTS, as described above) and the promotion of the Diploma Supplement (DS), which accompanies higher education diplomas, with the aim to provide a standardised description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies completed by its holder.

2.4 Governance of the EQF and inputs

Education and training system reform falls within the remit of Member States. As a consequence, room for action at European level is limited (the subsidiarity principle). In this context, governance structures at EU level are in line with this principle and part of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). EU Member States set their own national policies but learn from each other by sharing information and comparing initiatives. This principle governs the structure of the EQF.

The following sections will introduce the structures in place to support the EQF, the range of activities carried out under the EQF initiative and the tools in place to support these activities.

2.4.1 Governance structure

The EU-level governance arrangements relating to the EQF Recommendation are primarily comprised of the EQF Advisory Group and the EQF National Coordination Points, supported by the Commission and its agencies. The Commission coordinates both networks and provides the resources for the operation of the governance structures (including technical and logistical support). Commission agencies - namely Cedefop and ETF - support the process by providing expertise, analysis and follow-up on progress made. Cedefop and ETF participate in EQF advisory group and NCP meetings. Cedefop provides a significant contribution to the referencing process through its comments on referencing reports presented to the EQF advisory group, as well as technical expertise to the EQF implementation process – through the annual NQF studies, specific studies and with supporting PLAs. The ETF supports and transfers EQF knowledge to the Partner countries. Moreover, the EACEA managed the EQF projects between 2007 and 2011, and since 2012, the EACEA has managed NCP grants.

EQF Advisory Group

The EQF advisory group is composed of representatives of all countries taking part in the ET 2020 process, key EU level social partners and stakeholders²⁴. It also contains representatives from the Council of Europe (in order to ensure coordination with the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area), Cedefop and ETF. It is chaired by the Commission.

The EQF Recommendation gives the advisory group responsibility for providing the ‘overall coherence and promoting transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the EQF’. It oversees the EQF implementation by developing and adopting implementation measures and processes. The EQF advisory group is a forum for discussing and coordinating policy developments related to the EQF implementation. Points on the agenda of the EQF advisory group meetings have covered issues such as learning outcomes, the development of the EQF portal, quality assurance, international qualifications, the international dimension of the EQF, development of ESCO, etc.

²³ Source: Qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area: Criteria and procedures for self-certification

²⁴ The full list of members of the EQF advisory group is available in the Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities - European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (E02107) on <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=2107>

All countries that have finalised their referencing process present their referencing report to the advisory group before publication on the EQF portal and relevant national websites. The advisory group asks questions and makes remarks about the clarity and transparency of the results of the referencing process presented in the report. The country concerned is expected to take these comments into account and may consider reviewing the report accordingly. One of the key 'soft' tests for the methodology is the extent to which the group provides an effective and collaborative forum for referencing discussions, including a degree of challenge to countries presenting their reports and whether this adds value to national referencing.

Peer learning activities (PLA) are also regularly organised for members of the advisory group or other representatives from participating countries. PLAs enable staff in national authorities and other stakeholders to explore best practice and the challenges faced by countries in implementing the EQF. The peer learning activities support exchange of information and practice between countries. Peer learning activities focus on specific issues related to EQF or NQFs. A number of PLAs related to the EQF took place in the context of the Cluster on the Recognition of Learning Outcomes under ET 2010 (2006-2009) and the Learning Outcomes Group (2010-2011). The EQF advisory group itself has also organised PLAs. PLAs focused on topics related to NQFs, such as²⁵:

- stakeholder involvement in NQF development;
- how the learning outcomes approach, NQFs and quality assurance can best support lifelong learning²⁶ and the validation of informal and non-formal learning;
- specific education and training sub-systems (e.g. PLAs on higher education); and
- specific EQF levels (e.g. PLAs focusing on levels 1-2 and on level 5).

In 2013, the EQF Advisory Group adopted a two-year work programme on learning outcomes, which foresees peer learning activities aiming to promote exchange of experiences and key challenges related to the use of learning outcomes in specific contexts.

It is worth mentioning that other relevant PLAs have been organised by the Cluster (then Thematic Working Group) on Modernisation of Higher Education, such as the 2010 event on 'Implementing EQF / NQF in Higher Education'.

Sub-groups of the EQF advisory group have been created to address specific aspects of EQF implementation. The first sub-group was created to develop the ten **referencing criteria**²⁷, which was one of the first points on the agenda of the EQF advisory group in 2008-2009. The referencing criteria are used by countries to reference their national qualifications to the EQF. They advise countries on the procedures and criteria to be followed during the referencing process and in the presentation of the results in the referencing report. They are inspired by the self-certification criteria used for the QF-EHEA. Using nearly the same set of criteria enables certain countries to do the referencing to the EQF and the QF-EHEA at the same time through one single exercise. The referencing criteria are discussed in more detail in the EC note on *Referencing National Qualifications levels to the EQF*²⁸. The objective of this note was to provide advice and guidance for other countries which were in the process of referencing. This note presented how the countries that had prepared their referencing report by then interpreted the referencing criteria in their reports.

Several other sub-groups were established by the EQF advisory group and focused on quality assurance and sectoral qualifications. The cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes established under E&T 2010 was then integrated into the EQF advisory group and contributed, among other things, to the elaboration of the EQF Note on Using Learning Outcomes²⁹.

²⁵ PLA reports are available on:

<http://www.ksll.net/PeerLearningActivities/Default.cfm?id=22&year=2020>,
<http://www.ksll.net/PeerLearningActivities/Default.cfm?id=13&year=2010> and
<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=2107>

²⁶ this PLA was organised by the Learning Outcomes Group

²⁷ Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF (Ares(2009)89092)

²⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf

²⁹ European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 4 on Using Learning Outcomes
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf

EQF National Coordination Points

The EQF **National Coordination Points (NCP)** were introduced by the EQF Recommendation. It foresaw NCPs being designated by participating countries³⁰ to support and guide the relationship between national qualifications systems and the EQF and to ensure promotion of the quality and transparency of that relationship.

The EQF Recommendations set out four tasks for the NCPs:

- referencing levels of qualifications within national qualifications systems to the EQF levels;
- ensuring that a transparent methodology is used to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF in order to facilitate comparisons between them on the one hand, and ensuring that the resulting decisions are published on the other;
- providing access to information and guidance to stakeholders on how national qualifications relate to the EQF through national qualifications systems;
- promoting the participation of all relevant stakeholders including, in accordance with national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors and experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level.

All designated NCPs meet twice a year at EU level with a view to exchanging experience and discussing issues of common interest. In the context of one of these meetings, NCPs also have an annual joint meeting with national correspondents for the QF-EHEA. This aims to ensure consistency between activities and in terms of the over-arching implementation of the qualifications frameworks at national level.

2.4.2 EU support to EQF activities

The EU supported the EQF with two types of grants³¹: EQF pilot projects grants and activity³² grants to EQF NCPs, aiming to support the activities of the NCPs.

EQF pilot projects

In the period 2006-2011, the Commission co-funded 41 EQF pilot projects focused on testing the principles of the EQF. These projects were co-funded from the Leonardo da Vinci Programme (2006) managed by DG EAC and the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2009) managed by the EACEA. There were four rounds of calls for proposals (in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009). A budget of around two million euros was earmarked within each round from the Leonardo da Vinci programme and Lifelong Learning Programme. The calls preceding the adoption of the EQF Recommendation focused on projects aimed at testing the EQF principles, while the subsequent calls aimed to support implementation of the EQF. Overall, the projects aimed to:

- Develop and test methods for referencing to the EQF;
- Support the development of NQFs; and
- Strengthen the application of core EQF principles (in particular, learning outcomes-based qualifications and qualifications system levels).

The pilot projects were transnational in nature and were, in most cases, led by organisations such as:

- Higher education institutions;
- EU level sectoral bodies; or
- EU level stakeholder organisations.

A number of projects focused on specific sectors (e.g. sports, engineering, and hairdressing) or EQF levels.

³⁰ 35 countries have nominated NCPs. The UK have nominated 3 and Belgium 2

³¹ direct financial contributions by of donation from the EU budget (source: EU 2012 Financial Regulation, Art 121)

³² activity grants are to consider distinct from 'operating' grants, which aim to support the functioning of a body which pursues an aim of general Union interest or has an objective forming part of, and supporting, a Union policy. It means, in practice, that the grants are awarded in support of the EQF supported activities rather than structures carrying out the activities in question.

NCP activity grants

From 2010-2012, the NCPs have had the opportunity to request an EU grant from the Lifelong Learning Programme to co-fund some of their activities. These grants have covered a wide range of activities in line with priorities defined annually by the European Commission. In total, five million euros co-financed activities are covered by the NCP grants, including implementation support such as designing the referencing method or developing the referencing report, as well as activities supporting stakeholders' engagement in the referencing process or dissemination activities. The activities co-financed through the 2012 budget are being implemented until the end of 2013.

2.4.3 Support tools

The Commission supported the activities of the EQF advisory group and of the NCPs with additional tools, including a series of online tools and virtual communities.

First, the Commission supports the implementation of the EQF by developing and maintaining the EQF web-portal³³. The aim of the portal is to provide a single website for information about the EQF and the results of the national referencing processes. National referencing reports are published on the EQF portal. By the end of March 2013, eleven³⁴ referencing reports were published on the EQF portal. The portal also makes available the ten referencing criteria and support and guidance documents related to the EQF, such as the four EQF notes³⁵. The last three notes are based on discussions from peer-learning activities, EQF advisory group discussions, the work of the pilot projects and feedback from the available referencing reports. These notes are aimed at policy makers and stakeholders (included NCPs) involved in the NQF development and EQF implementation.

One of the main features of the EQF Portal – with the greatest potential in terms of visibility and readability of the EQF – is the functionality that allows 'comparison' of qualifications frameworks³⁶. In particular, the portal shows how national qualifications levels in countries that have completed referencing relate to the EQF levels.

The further development of the EQF portal is on-going. In its next phase, a search function is planned to be introduced that will make it possible to search for information on individual qualifications related to the EQF. This will require the interconnection of national databases with the common EQF interface and implies both conceptual and technical development on the part of the EQF advisory group. The search categories and technical linking of databases are being tested for decision by the EQF advisory group in 2013. The EQF portal development is financed through the LLP.

The EQF advisory group is also discussing how the EQF portal, which provides information on qualifications levels and qualifications, could be more closely linked to Ploteus, which is a European portal on learning opportunities. The work of the EQF Advisory Group and the EQF NCPs is also supported by the Commission's virtual community SINAPSE, which allows sharing documents and provides agenda functionalities.³⁷

Results of the work of the EQF advisory group are available to the general public through two other channels. The main conclusions of the PLAs are available on the Knowledge System for Lifelong Learning (KSLLL)³⁸ platform, which is a website providing comparable information on national policy and practice in priority fields within education and training. Some documents about the work of the

³³ http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm

³⁴ DE, DK, EE, FR, IE, LV, LT, MT, PT, NL, UK

³⁵ European Qualifications Framework Series, available on http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/documentation_en.htm:

EQF Note 1 Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (brochure) | 19.07.2010

EQF Note 2 Added value of National Qualifications Frameworks in implementing the EQF | 01.02.2010

EQF Note 3 Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF | 21.03.2011

EQF Note 4 Using Learning Outcomes | 25.11.2011

³⁶ At the end of March 2013, eleven of the 16 national referencing reports that had been presented to the EQF advisory group were available online. Nine of the 16 qualifications frameworks that had been referenced to the EQF were available for comparison under this functionality of the Portal

³⁷ Discussion forum functionality was available but not active at the end of March 2013.

³⁸ www.kslll.net

EQF advisory group and the EQF NCP network are also available through the Commission's Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities³⁹.

2.5 State of play in EQF implementation

The EQF Recommendation calls on participating countries to designate a NCP, to reference their national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF and to indicate the EQF level on all newly-issued certificates / documents of qualification delivered to individuals. Target dates are set for the two latter objectives:

- Referencing national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010
- Indicate the EQF level on all newly-issued certificates / documents of qualification delivered to individuals by 2012.

It is worth re-emphasising that EQF implementation is based on the referencing of levels of a national qualifications system to the levels of the EQF. It is not about referencing specific qualifications to the EQF level. Referencing levels of a national qualifications system to the levels of the EQF implies the existence of a structure composed of levels which can be referenced to the EQF levels. As one of the EQF referencing criteria states, there has to be a demonstrable link between the national levels and levels of the EQF (the latter being based on learning outcomes descriptors).

At the time of EQF design, there were only a few countries which had such explicit learning outcomes levels in their qualifications systems (e.g. France, Ireland and UK). In parallel to the EQF development process and inspired by it (but also by other developments) countries started developing national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes. Though it is not required to have an NQF in place to reference to the EQF, this makes the referencing process easier and clearer.

The countries that already had NQFs were generally the first to reference to the EQF. For other countries, there has been considerable development work in the period 2008-2012 to develop NQFs and, in most instances, EQF referencing is taking place hand-in-hand.

By the end of 2012, 24 countries had formally adopted national qualifications frameworks. A total of 16 countries had referenced their NQF to the EQF (15 Members States and 1 candidate country). Of these, France, Malta, UK and Ireland are furthest down the line in implementing their NQFs, and the remaining countries are in the early stages of implementation.

Most of the countries that have developed new NQFs have based them on the eight levels of the EQF. In total, 28 European countries have proposed or are developing an eight-level framework. All the NQFs that have been developed or are being developed are based on learning outcomes.

Regarding the second EQF milestone – reference to the EQF level on all newly-issued certificates or documents of qualification delivered to individuals – only some countries did so by the end of 2012:

- Five countries indicate EQF levels in Europass Certificates Supplement or Diplomas Supplements (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France and Ireland).
- Two of them indicate EQF levels in certificates or diplomas (Czech Republic, France). – Lithuania also indicates EQF levels on vocational qualifications certificates as of January 2013.

Moreover, four countries indicated EQF levels in national qualifications databases by the end of 2012 (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, and United Kingdom).

The EQF is expected to contribute to ensuring transparency in qualifications systems, thus facilitating their comparability. It is expected to generate mutual trust amongst qualifications stakeholders at national level, but also at European and international level. Mutual trust is considered a key objective of the Recommendation. If the EQF is not trusted among stakeholders, it will not effectively contribute to achieve the EU general objectives of lifelong learning, mobility, employability and social integration.

The extent to which these expected results have been achieved will be assessed in chapters 6 and 7.

³⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm>

3 Methodology

The evaluation was based around three sequential stages of activity:

- Stage 1 Inception and scoping phase (July to October 2012): The first stage of the evaluation included the design of an underpinning analytical framework, the development of research tools based on this framework and a series of high-level stakeholder consultations to test assumptions about the nature of EQF impact (the 'intervention logic' for the programme).
- Stage 2 Research (September 2012 to February 2013): The main research phase included tasks aimed at providing:
 - An overview of implementation at national level to ensure sufficient breadth of evaluation evidence: The completion of a country fiche based on national literature (studies, evaluations and national legislation) supported by follow-up interviews with key EQF stakeholders in order to verify, clarify and build on the country information collected through the desk research. The research team interviewed the EQF advisory group member and the EQF National Coordination Points (hereafter NCP) in each country⁴⁰. In preparation for the interviews, a common fiche was pre-populated for each country based on available evidence at national level.
 - Quantifiable evidence of EQF effectiveness and efficiency (an online survey of wider EQF stakeholders): The survey targeted EQF stakeholders identified from existing networks who were not necessarily directly involved in the implementation of the EQF (as opposed to EQF advisory group members and NCPs), but who have a legitimate interest in the EQF and its future. In total, 195 valid contributions were received. All countries were represented in the survey, except for Luxembourg and Turkey.
 - More detailed research to provide greater insight into the mechanics of EQF implementation at national level (based on detailed case studies in a sample of eight countries): The evaluation team carried out case studies in eight countries: Denmark; France; Germany; Ireland; Latvia; Poland; Romania; and Spain. The case studies provided a more analytical 'view' of progress within countries by interviewing a range of EQF stakeholders at national level⁴¹.
 - Complementary research focusing on particular elements of the EQF architecture that would otherwise be difficult to assess (an online survey of EQF pilot projects): The study team received 21 valid contributions to this survey from 12 countries. Some respondents were involved in multiple projects. As a consequence, 25 out of the 41 EQF pilot projects co-funded between 2006 and 2009 are represented in the EQF pilot project survey.
- Stage 3 Analysis and recommendations (November 2012 to April 2013): Stage three included the analysis and synthesis of the research evidence. It also involved interviews with a selection of European-level stakeholders to test emerging findings and to capture additional qualitative evidence, especially with regard to evaluation questions relating to the future relevance and international impact of the EQF.

The detailed methodology is presented in more details in **Error! Reference source not found.** to **Error! Reference source not found.** of this report.

⁴⁰ 57 interviews were undertaken with 61 EQF advisory group members and NCPs in 33 countries (1-4 interviews per country)

⁴¹ More than 60 interviews were carried out with EQF stakeholders at national level

4 The effectiveness of the EQF

This chapter presents findings in relation to the effectiveness of the EQF recommendation, i.e. the extent to which the initiative's objectives have been achieved. The chapter first addresses achievements related to the EQF's objective to create a common reference framework for qualifications, in particular in relation to meeting the target dates for relating national qualifications systems to the EQF and ensuring new certificates, diplomas and Europass documents refer to EQF levels; and whether this contributed to improve transparency and comparability of qualifications in Europe (4.1). The chapter also covers the extent to which the EQF has contributed to the use of learning outcomes and validation of informal and non-formal learning in participating countries (4.2). The effectiveness of the EQF in the context of qualifications developed by sector organisations is also considered (4.3).

The chapter therefore focuses on the main intermediate outcomes of the EQF recommendation, while the contribution of the EQF to wider lifelong learning and mobility objectives and its impact on national policy is addressed in chapter 8.

The main sources of information for the assessment of the effectiveness of the initiative are supra-national desk research (in particular EU legislation and literature about EU mobility and employment related initiatives), interviews with international stakeholders, a survey of EQF stakeholders, desk research at national level, interviews with EQF advisory group (AG) members and national contact point (NCPs). The chapter is also illustrated with examples from eight country-based case studies.

4.1 The EQF as a common reference framework for qualifications and its contribution to transparency and comparability of qualifications

As introduced in chapter 2, improving the transparency and comparability of qualifications are specific objectives of the EQF Recommendation. This sub-chapter focuses on the extent of countries' commitments to ensure transparency and comparability in practice, i.e. referencing their national qualifications levels to the EQF (4.1.1) and whether the approaches followed have been consistent among countries (4.1.2).

4.1.1 Achievements with regard to the EQF referencing target dates

This sub-section first presents an overview of achievements towards the EQF target dates and sets out how this information can be interpreted in relation to effectiveness of the EQF (4.1.1.1). It looks at the specific contribution of the target dates in this context (4.1.1.2) before going on to discuss the relationship between referencing and the development of NQFs (4.1.1.3), as well as the impact of NQF developments on the overall time taken to reference (4.1.1.4).

4.1.1.1 Interpreting the evidence on the meeting of the EQF target dates

The EQF Recommendation foresaw that all national qualifications systems should be related to the EQF by 2010 (referencing to the EQF) and that all new qualification certificates, diplomas and 'Europass' documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, via the national qualifications systems, to the appropriate EQF level by 2012⁴².

Table 4.1 below shows that 16 countries (half of those participating) had related their national qualifications systems to the EQF by the end of 2012. Only four countries met the 2010 deadline – and all of these countries had pre-existing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). **The fact that no countries without pre-existing NQFs met the deadline, while all countries remained committed to referencing qualifications systems to the EQF, suggests that the 2010 deadline was unworkable in the absence of an NQF.**

⁴² The state of play of the EQF Recommendation is presented in section 2.4

Table 4.1 Counties completing EQF referencing by year

Year	Number of countries	Countries
2009	3	UK*; Malta*; Ireland*
2010	1	France*
<i>Sub-total – end of 2010 (by the target date)</i>	<i>4</i>	
2011	8	Denmark; The Netherlands; Estonia; Portugal; Czech Republic; Belgium-Flanders*; Latvia; Lithuania
2012	4	Austria; Croatia; Germany; Luxembourg
<i>Total- end of 2012</i>	<i>16</i>	

**Countries with pre-existing National Qualifications Frameworks*

As half of the countries are still focusing on meeting the objectives set for the first target date, the second objective (ensure that documents issued by national authorities refer to the EQF, through the national qualification system by 2012) has been considered less of a priority among participating countries. Five countries have met this deadline and include a reference to EQF levels in their national documents and in national qualifications databases and five are in the process of doing so in 2013.

The vast majority of countries did not meet either deadline. However, it is clear that compliance with the deadlines set out in the Recommendation is, in itself, a poor indicator of commitment to ensuring comparability and transparency of qualifications. The extent of reform required at national level to enable transnational mobility and promote concrete improvements in access to lifelong learning meant in a substantial number of cases that the 2010 deadline (and therefore the 2012 deadline) could not realistically be met in anything other than an incomplete way. This could have entailed a superficial referencing to meet the deadline in many cases, which would not have engendered or enabled the kind of national debate or stakeholder consultation that is necessary to develop an effective NQF. If the national frameworks underpinning EQF referencing are not credible, then this would put the wider objectives of the EQF Recommendation at risk (i.e. it is unlikely to promote transparency and mutual trust).

Not meeting the deadlines set out in the Recommendation does not necessarily mean lack of commitment towards implementation of the EQF. On the contrary, late implementation may be an indication of the extent of commitment to the EQF and its wider ambitions. This scenario, which was widely voiced by stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation and which is a point made consistently in the existing EQF literature, means that measuring effectiveness is extremely complex. It suggests the following:

- Much more important than the achievement of arbitrary deadlines is whether there is sufficient evidence of progress and momentum towards EQF referencing – and whether this momentum can be maintained as the process extends over the course of years.
- It becomes extremely important to understand the dynamic underpinning the progress and momentum towards EQF referencing. This relates directly to the question of stakeholder support and engagement at national level. While those organisations and individuals directly tasked with the work of referencing may remain committed over time, the key measure is whether all stakeholders with responsibility for qualification systems remain actively engaged.

Although there is much less evidence regarding the meeting of the second EQF target date, the experiences of the countries in the vanguard of EQF implementation provides an insight into likely future challenges and developments in this area.

The process for ensuring that documents issued by national authorities refer to the EQF does not appear to be actively considered in advance of meeting the first target date. There was little evidence that countries in the process of referencing were thinking about the practicalities of ensuring that EQF level is indicated on all newly-issued certificates / documents of qualification issued to individuals. The two EQF deadlines are treated sequentially in most countries. This is a rational approach, but may mean that the easy access of EQF level on qualifications documents for individuals is further delayed. This is significant because enabling individuals to have easy access to the EQF level is crucial to both raising wider awareness about EQF levels and achieving the benefits for individuals.

The inclusion of EQF levels on Europass diploma and certificate supplements has happened in Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France and Ireland. In other countries, the more difficult challenge for many national authorities is how to ensure that all qualification awarding bodies and institutions include reference to the EQF level on the certificates / documents received by individuals. Depending on how comprehensive the NQF is in relation education and training sub-systems, this can require action from a large number of organisations. In some countries, national authorities may encourage awarding institutions / bodies to make reference to EQF level, but they cannot compel them to do so.

In practice, therefore, delivering qualifications documents setting out EQF level depends on wider progress in rolling out diploma and certificate supplements. This factor may influence the time taken to achieve objectives linked to the second EQF deadline. The important point from the case studies is that there is evidence of large awarding institutions (such as major universities) agreeing to provide all students with documents that show EQF level subsequent to the referencing process – i.e. there is evidence of progress being made. It is likely to be important in future that countries effectively monitor progress with these developments so that, at European level, it possible to see whether momentum is growing.

It was commonly reported in the countries most advanced with EQF implementation that user demand is an important driver for achieving the second EQF deadline. In the UK, for example, where there is an extensive qualifications market and a large number of awarding organisations, it was noted that some of the major awarding organisations are themselves actively pushing the inclusion of EQF level on certificates. They do so either because they are offering qualifications internationally and the inclusion of EQF level is therefore a rational commercial decision, or because customers (learners) are pushing for this information in the specific contexts in which they need it.

It is argued that this commercial and demand-driven rationale becomes the most powerful driver for awarding institutions and organisations to include EQF level on qualifications documents as a matter of course. It is also argued that as individual awarding organisations agree to do this, it creates a virtuous circle for other organisations to choose to follow the same path. In time, this may mean that it becomes usual practice for qualifications organisations and institutions to include reference to EQF level. This is put forward in some cases as being the rationale for not requiring qualifications organisations to comply (i.e. because of the clear value of comparability in an international market for learning and for work). Given the level of progress to date in meeting the first EQF deadline, it is too early to test the veracity of these assumptions - but this is likely to be a key test of the effectiveness and relevance of the EQF in future.

4.1.1.2 The added value of the target dates

Based on progress to date, it is possible that EQF referencing could continue into 2014. Fewer countries completed referencing in 2012 than in 2011. It is important to note that while the first EQF target date was not widely met, this does not mean that stakeholders generally see the setting of the date as problematic. Numerous stakeholders reported the value in having an ambitious timetable for referencing as helping to generate momentum at national level. National stakeholders interviews almost unanimously reported that the target dates agreed in 2008 were not realistic for most countries. However, they agreed that the existence of these targets dates gave a structure to the implementation action plan of participating countries

What was important in this context, and generally felt to be well-handled by the European Commission and the EQF Advisory Group, was ensuring a balance between ensuring pressure to maintain momentum while recognising that the most important dimension was that the process was effective as possible bearing in mind national constraints.

This goes to the heart of the requirements of a policy instrument based ultimately on voluntary co-operation at national level. It is therefore significant that, by the end of 2012, all countries remained committed to EQF referencing activities and, from the interviews at national level, it is clear that work is continuing even where referencing is incomplete. The momentum may be variable, but continued progress is evident.

Participating countries still aim for a comparison tool that makes European qualifications more transparent and clear. This is significant because it shows that beyond the mechanics of actual progress to date, **the underpinning commitment to the EQF objectives remains relatively strong**. Given that over the last five years the concept of a European translation tool has been fairly robustly tested through the countries having referenced to date, it is notable that specific challenges and difficulties have not undermined the credibility of the Framework. Many stakeholders argued that

important aspects of the Framework remain largely untested – for example, whether the completion of national referencing processes will lead to qualifications aligned by level between countries in a way that is trusted and fair. However, most stakeholders appeared optimistic about this given a recognition of the progress in many countries to date (progress that is not necessarily best-captured through the binary measure of whether a referencing report has been submitted or not).

4.1.1.3 *The relationship between EQF and NQF development*

The EQF Recommendation gave the opportunity for countries to choose between referencing their national qualifications system to the EQF or to do it via an NQF. Although this was suggested, but not required, in the EQF Recommendation, almost all countries chose the NQF route. This was not the case in Italy, for instance, where referencing qualifications to the EQF took place before the design of the NQF. This suggests a significant impact of the EQF process. **It seems unlikely that all countries would have undertaken to develop an NQF within the same timescale without the EQF being some form of a catalyst.** The link here is not directly causal – there was little evidence from interviewees that the decision to develop an NQF was primarily or solely driven by the commitment to meeting the EQF Recommendation.

In reality, support for the EQF and NQF development go hand-in-hand. What the EQF provides is an overall timetable to drive NQF development. It also provides parameters that ensure that NQF development occurs:

- consistently across different countries (providing benefits in terms of the international dimension to NQFs: i.e. the comparability of qualifications);
- in a way that supports certain design characteristics based on the EQF main features (the use of levels, learning outcomes descriptors; approaches to quality assurance), and supported by the EQF referencing criteria.

This helps to minimise, even though it does not entirely remove, differences between NQFs.

In reality, the first countries to reference arguably indicate the EQF having less influence on national systems rather than indicating greater commitment to the EQF. There may have been less of a need for systemic reform in these countries, because, for example, of existing experience in using learning outcomes for qualification design. It meant in some cases that the EQF referencing could be undertaken without either promoting the EQF among stakeholders or requiring active engagement with stakeholders for improvements to the national qualification system. At least one exception here is Ireland, where the timing of NQF development (quite closely preceding EQF activity) and the major focus on the difficult task of promoting and engaging national debate on the national framework as part of NQF development, created conditions in which the benefits of the EQF (for learner and professional mobility) were much more heavily promoted to the population than in other contexts.

4.1.1.4 *The relationship between approach to referencing and time taken to reference*

It is clear that the decision whether to reference directly to the EQF or to design a NQF has contributed to delays in the process in some countries, in particular due to research work undertaken in preparation for NQF design or referencing. Most countries used input from research for the development of NQFs and the referencing. The following examples illustrate how research has been used:

- In Poland, after preliminary work was completed at ministerial level, the Education Research Institute was commissioned to carry out the project “*Development of Terms of Reference for the Implementation of the NQF and the national qualifications register for lifelong learning*”. The main objective was to develop the concept of an integrated national qualification system, including proposals for its main components: the Polish Qualification Framework, national register of qualifications, quality assurance principles of qualification and validation of learning outcomes, principles of transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes and principles for assigning qualification to PQF levels. The Educational Research Institute worked very closely with a wide range of stakeholders, including social partner (employers and trade unions). However, the effect of this research was considered limited by some of the stakeholders interviewed in the Polish case studies, as the final decision whether to take the outcomes of the research work on-board are taken at Ministry level.
- In Austria, research was extensively used in the first ‘fact-finding phase’ of the NQF project in order to gather information and analyse it in advance of a stakeholder consultation. Interviewees in Austria considered this aspect of the EQF project was the

main driver to the EQF implementation in Austria, together with the national pilot exercises carried out.

- Germany also presented an interesting approach to testing. As part of the national implementation, four occupational areas and fields of activity were tested. The areas/fields of activity were: metal working/electrical engineering, trade, health and information technology. The main “methodological instrument” in this phase was the organisation of expert workshops in which experts from different fields, including ministries, education and training representatives, enterprise and associations provided the opportunity to verify whether or not the NQF draft was easy to handle from all perspectives. This process required substantial effort and time. Many stakeholders feel, however, that this testing phase of the NQF proposal gave additional impetus to the process. This is seen as a worthwhile investment to ensure acceptance and sustainability of the NQF instead of a weakness of the system.

On top of delays resulting from useful and sensible preparatory activities supporting NQF design or EQF referencing, the desk research and interviews with EQF advisory group members and NCPs show that the majority of delays in meeting the first deadline were the result of a common set of challenges:

- Political/administrative changes which delayed the agreements on developing an NQF.
- National stakeholder resistance.
- Difficulties in referencing certain qualifications.
- Problems in interpreting and translating terms such as ‘qualifications’ and ‘learning outcomes’.

Countries often faced both technical and political issues in referencing qualifications to the EQF. Whilst some countries have successfully referenced their qualifications, other seems to perceive EQF as a theoretical tool that is difficult to apply to the national context. This appears to be the case where factors such as national stakeholder resistance or the national political context inhibit having an effective debate about how the EQF levels relate to the national qualifications system in practice.

Nevertheless, even in cases where such issues hampered the EQF implementation process and prevented a large majority of countries from meeting the target dates, **the EQF Recommendation opened the debate at the national level about the added value of having a meta-framework for qualifications at the EU-level.** Remaining issues such as problems in referencing certain qualifications will need time to be resolved, but were not considered long-term obstacles to implementation.

4.1.2 Consistency, transparency and comparability of the referencing approaches

This sub-chapter introduces the referencing approaches used in EQF countries (consistency). It also covers the extent to which these approaches were clearly presented and made understandable (transparency) and the extent to which referencing contributed to making qualifications comparable in practice, in particular in relation to mutual trust in referencing (comparability).

A substantial majority of the countries that had referenced an NQF to the EQF by the end of 2102 used similar approaches for establishing their referencing:

- Almost all countries undertook a contextual analysis and comparison between the EQF level descriptors and learning outcomes with the definition of the national qualifications. In some cases, specific working groups – involving, national experts and social partners – were created to undertake this analysis.
- A small share of countries had analysed the results of a pilot project in order to identify guidance for the referencing process.
- International experts were generally actively used as part to the referencing process and were widely considered to be a valuable input into the process.
- A considerable number of countries have proactively looked at good practice from other countries. It was typical (especially among Nordic countries) to analyse how neighbouring countries or countries with a similar educational system had established their referencing. Other countries’ practices were therefore taken into account and influenced the referencing process in various countries.

Two further aspects of the referencing approach will be further developed in the sub-section below:

- Countries used the best-fit approach – rather than full-fit – for referencing their national qualifications level to the EQF (4.1.2.1).
- The extent of stakeholder involvement in the referencing process has varied between countries (4.1.2.2).

The last sub-sections set out the extent to which the referencing approaches have been transparent (4.1.2.3) and what further support might be required for referencing in the future (4.1.2.4).

4.1.2.1 *Best-fit vs. full-fit*

Two approaches were used for referencing national qualification levels to the EQF:

- The full-fit principle: qualifications are assigned to a given EQF level when they perfectly match the learning outcomes descriptors.
- The best-fit principle: qualifications that do not perfectly match the learning outcomes descriptors of any of the EQF levels are assigned to the EQF level for which learning outcomes descriptors best accommodate this qualification level, in comparison with the other EQF levels.

The application of the full-fit principle is difficult to apply in the context of the EQF, considering the variety of qualifications and of national qualifications systems:

- Application of the full-fit principles would have required the learning outcomes descriptors to be expressed in more general terms so as to be able to accommodate any situation. This is virtually impossible and such learning outcome descriptors would make the EQF pointless.
- The full fit principle applied to learning outcomes descriptors as defined in the EQF Recommendation would result in leaving out all qualifications that do not perfectly match any of the learning outcomes descriptors of an EQF level, thus going against the objective of the EQF to accommodate all kinds of qualifications.

The best-fit principle is better adapted to the realities of qualifications in Europe – the variety, diversity and strong links to national education and training systems. It implies a *judgement* on where a given (group of) qualifications fit in the EQF.

It is important to ensure that the best-fit principle is understood and used the same way in all countries so as to ensure consistency in the way qualifications relate to the EQF. It is also important to ensure the outcome of this approach – referencing of a set of qualifications to the EQF – is accepted and trusted by a wide range of stakeholders. The EQF note on referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF emphasises that best-fit should be *'a decision (...) based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders'*.

The best way to ensure stakeholders trust and accept this judgement is to give them the opportunity to be associated with or represented in the process leading to referencing (see more generally section 4.1.2.2 on stakeholders' involvement in referencing and section 5.1.2 on NCP and stakeholder involvement in the EQF). The EQF pilot ZOOM⁴³ project directly tested the best-fit approach and produced a series of recommendations on how to effectively involve stakeholders in the process and ensure their acceptance of its outcomes.

The French referencing report mentions issues encountered in referencing and linked to the fact that some qualifications were between two EQF levels. In these cases, application of the best fit approach allowed for the accommodation of qualifications to the EQF level at which they best fitted. Here again, the involvement of stakeholders in this exercise ensured acceptance of the referencing decision.

Although the best-fit approach has been chosen by most countries, there are examples of different approaches to referencing, combining the full-fit and the best-fit approach. In Denmark, for instance, the full-fit approach was applied to referencing qualifications to levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. The best-fit approach was applied to all other qualifications (level 1 to 5 of the EQF) - i.e. the qualification has been referenced at the level where the qualification and its learning outcomes fit best with the descriptors (without necessarily corresponding to all descriptors).

⁴³ The ZOOM project - building up mutual trust: Zooming in on EQF-level six with regard to the engineering sector (2009-2011)

4.1.2.2 Stakeholder involvement in referencing

Another important variation between countries is the extent to which stakeholders have been involved in the referencing process. Interviewees at national level reported that in addition to the NCP, Ministries, and international experts, the referencing process also involved, in the vast majority of countries, key representatives of national qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies, social partners as well as, in some cases, national experts in the field of education. This typically led to the creation of ‘advisory groups’, ‘consultation committees’ or ‘working committees’, etc. depending on the country.

More than a quarter of national stakeholders surveyed have actively contributed to the referencing process, while about 40% said they had been consulted as part of the referencing process and a third have not been involved at all in the referencing process⁴⁴.

As the EQF stakeholders surveyed targeted primarily those that had an interest in the EQF (subscribers to the EQF newsletter and stakeholders of EU initiatives linked to recognition and mobility), this shows that involvement is quite high among those who would have been expected to have an interest in the EQF. It suggests a model in which a core group provide much of the active work to reference (e.g. the application of the best-fit approach), but with a wider group of stakeholders providing a check and balance to decisions made by the core group to ensure wider legitimacy to the process. This appears to be a sensible approach given that ascribing national qualifications to an EQF level involves discussion and testing that lends itself to an advisory or working group format.

Interviewees’ views on stakeholder involvement in the referencing process varied. Even if most of the interviewees knew about the EQF and had been involved in a way, the majority reported that they did not have much weight in the referencing process. This was particularly true for representatives of the social partners. Stakeholders with a strong focus on specific (sets of) qualification(s) or on an education and training sub-system (e.g. VET) felt their voice had greater weight. Although they represent a minority of interviewees, some social partners interviews in the case studies reported having troubles understanding what was in it for them and why they should be involved in the process. This was confirmed by some NCPs, who reported difficulties reaching social partners.

This shows that the communications effort should target these groups, particularly as stakeholders’ willingness to get involved in the referencing process and qualifications-related issues and their overall confidence in the EQF depends on whether they know about it and understand it in the first place. Effective stakeholder involvement in the referencing process is important as it has direct consequences on awareness and acceptance of the EQF.

4.1.2.3 Transparency of referencing approaches and comparability of qualifications

Overall, referencing methodologies and processes were consistent and comparable enough in order to ensure transparent referencing. Desk research and interview results show that, in some countries, there is a lack of explanation about the referencing method, thus limiting the transparency of the referencing process. The extent of this trust in the referencing process was investigated in interviews with EQF advisory group members. These interviewees reported that while there was a reasonable degree of trust in the referencing process in other countries overall, it was sometimes difficult to understand the method applied. The referencing methodologies presented in referencing reports were sometimes unclear to other members of the EQF advisory group (lack of details, lack of background information to understand the national context). This may be due to the fact that the way referencing process is organised at national level highly depends on the national context.

This was particularly the case in the first referencing reports presented to the EQF advisory group. For instance, when Malta presented the first version of its referencing report in 2009 it was suggested that the presentation of its referencing methodology needed further improvement. It was for instance specified that a more thorough description of the referencing methodology developed and used during the referencing process would improve the quality of the report.⁴⁵ Malta published revised versions of the referencing report (two occurrences). It is less of a problem in the latest referencing reports. The German referencing report, presented in December 2012, was praised for the clarity and transparency of its methodology.

⁴⁴ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁴⁵ Source: Expert opinion on the report of May 2009, reported in Malta Qualifications Council, April 2012, Referencing the MQF to the EQF and the QF-EHEA, 3rd revised edition

This indicates a degree of shared learning within the EQF advisory group as the referencing process has progressed – and that members have clearly reflected on what needs to be included in the report and how it should be presented when submitting their own national reports further down the line.

There is also, in some cases, a lack of confidence, not about the various referencing principles and criteria themselves, but about how each country interprets and applies them in practice, as well as whether they are being effectively used as a basis for referencing qualifications. As mentioned by some stakeholders⁴⁶ in the open comments to the online survey, issues relating to the interpretation of the various principles and the ten referencing criteria and procedures hinder trust in the referencing process. For instance, it was often noted that:

- quality assurance principles can be interpreted in different ways and therefore more clarification was needed;
- if one compares how level descriptors were translated across countries, different interpretations can be observed (criterion 2);
- there is confusion across countries about what the reference to learning outcomes means (criterion 3), how to use them – i.e. not all the countries speak the learning outcomes based language and therefore descriptors are used very differently in various countries;
- there is a lack of understanding of the parallel structures – e.g. it is difficult to understand the difference between EQF-LLL and QF-EHEA;
- there is insufficient central control over the quality and reliability of the referencing process from country to country, which therefore hinders trust between countries (this might be considered to be a necessary trade-off inherent to the Recommendation instrument).

EU-level stakeholder opinions about the referencing methodologies follow a similar pattern to that of national-level stakeholders. These results imply that **trust issues are not about the criteria and principles themselves, but about how each country interprets them and applies them in practice, as well as whether they effectively use them as a basis for referencing their qualifications.**

However, the lack of clarity about the referencing process in some referencing reports has had a very limited impact on mutual trust. When asked whether their lack of understanding of the details of the referencing process impacted on their trust in referencing, a large majority of interviewees among EQF advisory group members reported that it was not the case, as long as the general principles contained in the referencing criteria were respected.

In the same vein, stakeholders were divided when assessing the extent to which referencing methodologies contributed to making the referencing trusted by other stakeholders. Fewer than half of survey respondents thought that referencing methodologies contributed to making the referencing process trusted at national or international level. There is also a considerable share of stakeholders who, unsurprisingly, had no opinion on the issue. The share of stakeholders who thought that methodologies applied in the referencing process did not have an impact on making the referencing process more transparent, consistent and comparable is noticeably low (between 4% and 14%). This suggests acceptance of the national context and its influence on the referencing approach and indicates that the result of the referencing matters more than the method applied.

4.1.2.4 *Support for ensuring continued progress in EQF referencing*

In terms of measures that could support progress on the EQF Recommendation, interviewees among EQF NCPs and advisory group members reported a need for:

- further guidance on the interpretation of some terms;
- further guidance on the added value of the EQF for national stakeholders;
- best practice examples of how issues of referencing or interpretation were solved within national contexts;
- continued monitoring and follow-up on each country's process in order to ensure a reliable referencing to the EQF and to ensure trust among EU stakeholders is maintained and builds over time.

⁴⁶ National and international VET stakeholders (mainly VET providers)

Interviewees among other stakeholders reported that guidance and support should be provided directly at the national level, perhaps by ensuring a more proactive role of the NCPs in the dissemination of information and best practices examples. In addition, it was felt that the EQF advisory group should play a greater role in reshaping the current monitoring system with the aim to use it as a tool to report not only at European level, but also at national level. This would contribute to mutual trust among stakeholders and confidence in the EQF.

4.2 The EQF's contribution to the use of learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe

This sub-chapter covers the extent to which the EQF Recommendation contributed to the use of the learning outcomes approach and the extent to which it boosted validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in Europe.

4.2.1 Learning outcomes approach

Learning outcomes - *i.e. what a learner knows, understands and is able to do* – are core to the EQF. The eight EQF levels are described using learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

The learning outcomes approach is implemented widely but not comprehensively in European education and training systems. Around four fifth of countries interviewed reportedly have learning outcomes in place in at least one education sub-system (school education, adult education, VET or higher education). However, the extent to which learning outcomes are embedded in curricula across each education sub-systems, the way learning outcomes were introduced in each sub-systems and the assessment process available varies greatly. Still, it could be supported that the VET sub-system uses learning outcomes more extensively than the other education sub-systems. The Bologna Process has also contributed to an extensive and highly visible use of learning outcomes in higher education. **Each education sub-system of a country has introduced and/or is implementing learning outcomes according to its specific characteristics.** The fundamental EQF approach is therefore in line with the direction of travel of European education and training systems. Furthermore, the EQF approach positively reinforces this long-term development at national level.

Although the principle of learning outcomes is widely accepted, the extent to which it is used in practice varies across countries. In a small number of countries, stakeholders report that although the learning outcomes approach is formally stated, it has not been put into practice yet. There appears to be variation in the extent to which learning outcomes are established at institutional level. This limits the ability of some national stakeholders across a substantial number of countries to progress towards implementation of the EQF alignment and referencing. This does not appear to be a barrier to referencing *per se*, but numerous stakeholders noted the limited use of learning outcomes in practice is a barrier to wider engagement with the EQF within countries. There is also a gap between national level stakeholder perspectives on the use of learning outcomes generally and knowledge about the use of learning outcomes at institutional level. This makes it very difficult to measure the impact of the EQF on the use of learning outcomes in practice at institutional level.

Many stakeholders in the context of higher education have reported that the shift to learning outcomes was triggered by the Bologna process. The Bologna process therefore supports EQF engagement, although it was in the context of higher education that 'buy in' to learning outcomes was often reported as being difficult to achieve. This partly relates to the autonomy of higher education institutions in some countries simply making it harder to achieve a consistent national approach in line with the ambitions of Bologna or the EQF. This is perhaps best understood as a long-term process of culture change in education (notable in higher education but certainly not exclusive to this area of learning) that the EQF is more dependent on than able to influence. Crucially, this somewhat uneven process of change is taking place over a much longer time period than that elapsed between the adoption of the EQF recommendation and now.

The influence of the EQF on the use of learning outcomes varies alongside countries' experience with learning outcomes. About one third of the countries had introduced learning outcomes well before the EQF Recommendation. For these countries, the EQF reportedly had no or little impact on the use of learning outcomes. Moreover, some interviewees admitted that their countries do not fully include the learning outcome approach in their curricula.

The level of experience in learning outcomes impacts on the way a country sees the EQF and its effect. More specifically, countries that do not have a tradition in learning outcomes admit that the EQF was the driving power, the inspiration of any relevant developments. This was particularly confirmed by interviewees in a large majority of countries, which stated that the EQF/NQF had significantly reinforced the learning outcome approach in their country. Supportive of this finding is the fact that many countries develop (or have developed) simultaneously their NQF and the shift to learning outcomes. Indeed, it seems that the EQF Recommendation stimulated or crystallised education reforms. The shift to learning outcomes is for “novice” countries one of the main pillars in such reform actions.

Examples of this (expected) influence were expressed by interviewees in terms of:

- Introducing the use of learning outcomes in the country (Slovakia) and/or making the use of learning outcomes a higher priority in the policy agenda (Iceland, Italy);
- Driving programme (system level) and curriculum design (provider level) in Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia;
- Giving labour market relevance to qualifications, and making this relevance more explicit (Croatia, Estonia).

Only interviewees in Denmark spontaneously linked the use of learning outcomes as a way to improve the quality of education and training.

In case study countries, the question of the extent to which the learning outcomes approach was used in practice was also addressed. Denmark highlighted the influence of the EQF/NQF in reshaping programmes (system level) and curriculum (provider level) in terms of learning outcomes. The issues of the extent to which learning outcomes are actually used in assessments was felt to be particularly important in Spain, where the use of learning outcomes for assessment was perceived to be an area that needs particular work, especially in the development of assessment practices that provide an effective check on whether stated learning outcomes have been achieved.

In Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania, Switzerland and the UK, the influence of the EQF/NQF on the learning outcomes approach in the country was felt to be limited to non-existent. This was due, in most cases, to the pre-existence of the learning outcomes culture in the country prior to the EQF/NQF developments. However, even if the EQF had limited impact on the use of learning outcomes in these countries, **the Framework is recognised as a beneficial tool that will lead all countries to the adoption of a framework and the use of learning outcomes, thus promoting alignment of education methods across Europe.** Subsequently, EQF and NQFs are recognised as means to promote understanding, transparency, understanding and trust among Member States and further.

4.2.2 Validation of non-formal and informal learning

VNFIL is not widely offered in European education and training systems. Interviewees in half of the countries participating in the EQF reported having in place a validation system for some non-formal or informal learning. However, VNFIL does not concern all levels of qualifications in most cases. It most typically relates to vocational/professional qualifications.

The EQF has triggered VNFIL to a limited extent so far, but has a higher potential influence for the future. Stakeholders interviewed in most countries assess that the EQF had a positive effect on the VNFIL (stakeholders in only one country reported this effect was low).

Examples of the effect of the NQF on validation were found, for instance, in Cyprus, where the question of recognising prior learning arose in the discussion about the NQF and has remained a priority since then. In Estonia, one of the changes that the NQF has introduced is to increase the visibility and transparency of the validation process. In Greece, discussion about the EQF/NQF has brought validation higher up in the policy agenda and been a catalyst for discussion about how to widen the current validation process. A validation system was developed in Denmark in 2007, but it was not felt to have been influenced by the EQF by a majority of interviewees for this case study.

Among interviewees, only a few considered that including qualifications awarded outside formal education systems into a NQF could potentially make validation more difficult. It was generally agreed that having a NQF should provide greater opportunity to promote VNFIL. However, interviewees simultaneously admit that the main hindering factor for validation systems is the low level of priority in the political agenda.

In countries with strong cultures in VNFIL (e.g. France and Norway, Spain to a lesser extent), where VNFIL is recognised as a learning path, overall acceptance of and trust in the respective validation processes can be considered a given. Due to the differences in countries' progress, there are few countries that have such systems in place. Given that there are countries that have embedded such learning in their qualifications prior to the EQF recommendation, it could be supported that the relevant processes have been assessed as efficient for the domestic needs and effectively serve learners and the society overall.

Interviewees also highlighted the link between the use of learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning. In countries where the validation culture is strong, the learning outcomes approach is more used and accepted, as it has been 'tested' in practice. Validation of non-formal learning potentially facilitates the learning outcomes approach. This was particularly the case in France. In Finland and Germany, the reverse effect is expected: the use of learning outcomes through the NQF is anticipated to facilitate validation of non-formal learning.

As far as other countries are concerned, the role of EQF is reportedly central to the VNFIL. This was particularly felt to be the case in Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey, where the development of validation is expected to result from the EQF/NQF. In these countries, the EQF is trusted as a common framework that will boost comparability and transparency. Thus, even in countries that have just begun the implementation of such processes or are even at the consultation stage, one could argue that the trust in EQF could contribute to reinforce stakeholders' acceptance of the validation processes. This was not the case in Austria, where the expected influence of the NQF on validation was low.

4.3 Effectiveness of the EQF in the context of international sector qualifications

The number of qualifications awarded by international sector organisations is increasing. These qualifications are awarded outside the jurisdiction of public authorities, including by multinational companies. For instance, qualifications in the hairdressing sector, international qualifications for sport professionals and qualifications in the welding sector are examples of such international qualifications.

While the transparency of national qualifications is improving, these international qualifications are still very complex (given their non-state nature) and more transparency is required. One of the issues is that these qualifications are to be related to NQFs – rather than the EQF – and there is a risk that they are related to national levels that do not correspond to the same EQF level.

There was debate in the EQF advisory group (in particular, its subgroup on sectoral and international qualifications) about whether these qualifications could be directly or indirectly referenced to the EQF. It was decided that references to sectoral qualifications to the EQF should be made via NQF first. There is no mandate for the EQF advisory group to position international sector qualifications against to the EQF. It does not mean that the EQF advisory group should not ensure effective dialogue with organisations in charge of these sector qualifications and propose synergies, when relevant.

Stakeholders questioned the effectiveness of the EQF to reflect qualifications if it only considers part of them. Some stakeholders mentioned the risk of seeing the development of parallel qualifications systems if there is no effective dialogue between the EQF and international qualifications. A counterpoint might legitimately be argued that if national developments provide an effective testing ground for the EQF in quite different education and training contexts, there is no reason why the principles of the meta-framework should not be just as applicable to robust sector qualifications.

The existence of a risk that the same qualifications are referred to different levels by different countries was mentioned in interviews (e.g. international Welding qualifications). This risk of differences in relating qualifications to the EQF (through NQFs) exist. EQF pilot projects provide examples of how sector qualifications can be related to the EQF, through NQFs. For instance an EQF pilot project contributed to the development of a qualifications in the hairdressing sector (EQF HAIR) and ended up with an agreement among project partners about to which level of the EQF (through NQFs) a specific hairdressing qualification should be related (Level 4 for the European hairdressing certificate). Testing through EQF pilot projects may offer a way to tackle these issues. This should be considered for the future implementation of the EQF.

4.4 Conclusions about the effectiveness of the EQF

Findings on the effectiveness of the EQF are summarised below:

- **The effectiveness in relation to the target dates:** Although the target dates were only met by a few countries⁴⁷, it is clear that countries are committed to working towards meeting the objectives (i.e. to reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF and to ensure that diplomas, certificates and Europass supplements refer to the relevant EQF level). Fully achieving these objectives has been a priority over doing it within the deadlines. Commitment to these objectives remains strong, even if the target dates have passed.
- **The effectiveness in relation to referencing:** Overall, the referencing methods have been consistent enough to ensure transparency among EQF stakeholders, thus generating increased mutual trust among countries. The EQF advisory group activities (presentations and discussions of the referencing reports, peer learning activities, EQF notes) organised to support referencing have played an important role in that respect. There is evidence that the referencing criteria have supported a degree of consistency in the referencing process, but room for interpretation remains in the formulation of the referencing criteria, which may limit this contribution.
- **The effectiveness of the EQF with regard to the use of learning outcomes:** Although evidence of the effects of the EQF on the use of learning outcomes has been scarce so far, these effects are perceived to be potentially very significant in the future and, as such, would be worth investigating at a later date. The reverse link between the EQF and learning outcomes is also observed. In countries where the learning outcomes approach is more established (mainly in higher education and introduced by the ECTS and the QF-EHEA), EQF implementation is more straightforward. There appears to be a mind-set in place in these countries associated with greater openness to the EQF model. This effect depends on countries' situation regarding the implementation of the EQF (whether an NQF has been designed yet or whether national qualifications levels have been referenced to the EQF) and the extent of learning outcomes use at national level (e.g. only in higher education or extended to other education sub-systems, used in course design/description as well as in assessments, etc.).
- **The effectiveness of the EQF with regard to validation of non-formal and informal learning:** Evidence on the effects of the EQF on validation so far has been scarce. Where validation systems are in place, this typically pre-dates the EQF and is a consequence of a wider culture of validation of learning at national level. However, expectations about the future contribution of the EQF to the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning are high and there is a clear sense that the EQF provides an opportunity to facilitate access to validation. This is most persuasively characterised in terms of the EQF providing a framework and quality guarantees to underpin validation systems in European countries.
- **The effectiveness of the EQF as reference point (national level):** Stakeholders' awareness and understanding of the EQF and its national implementation is high among direct qualifications stakeholders (insiders, i.e. those directly involved in the EQF and NQF development, such as national authorities in charge of education and/or training, qualifications authorities and – to a lesser extent – representatives of social partners). Awareness is much lower among other groups, such as the large majority of social partners, education and training providers, learners, as well as the general public. Social partners' involvement in EQF and NQF developments varies greatly among countries. In some cases, national authorities have been reluctant to actively promote the EQF to wider users, such as social partners, while the referencing process is still underway.
- **The effectiveness of the EQF as reference point (international level):** Data collected for this evaluation shows little evidence that the EQF is a reference point for international sector organisations, i.e. the extent to which the EQF facilitates consistency in the award of international sector qualifications at national level.

Recommendations on this evaluation theme are presented in Chapter 9 Conclusions and Recommendations.

⁴⁷ Four countries met the 2010 deadline, six met the 2012 deadline

5 The efficiency of the EQF and its implementation structure

This chapter considers the efficiency of the EQF and its supporting implementation structure. The analysis of efficiency looks at the EQF Recommendation in relation to associated inputs (resources) and outputs, to examine the extent to which the initiative has achieved outputs and results at a reasonable cost in terms of the resources deployed.

The first sub-chapter focuses on the implementation structure in place at EU level and national level. The second sub-chapter focuses on EU support to EQF-related activities, NCP activities and EQF pilot projects.

The main sources of information for the assessment of the efficiency of the initiative are supra-national desk research (including: working documents of the EQF advisory group and relating to the NCPs; management information relating to the EQF pilot projects; the overview of the activities co-financed under the Commission grant to EQF National Coordination Points in 2010 and 2011; and Cedefop's 2012 NCP survey), interviews with international stakeholders, a survey of EQF stakeholders, a survey of EQF projects leaders and partners, desk research at national level, interviews with EQF advisory group members and national contact point (NCPs). This chapter is also illustrated with examples from eight country-based case studies.

5.1 Implementation structure

This sub-chapter covers the EQF implementation structure in place at EU level and national level. It focuses in particular on the EQF advisory group (5.1.1) and the EQF NCP network (5.1.2). It also assesses the EQF support tools (EQF Portal and virtual communities), introduced in chapter 2 (5.1.3).

5.1.1 Implementation structure at EU level: the EQF Advisory Group

This sub-chapter focuses on the EQF advisory group, its composition, roles and activities. It aims to clarify the extent to which the overall approach and structure of the EQF advisory group ensured adequate guidance and steering of the EQF initiative and referencing processes at national level. It also addresses the extent to which the Advisory Group and its processes and procedures have ensured continuous momentum for EQF implementation.

5.1.1.1 Composition of and roles in the EQF Advisory Group

The EQF Advisory Group is composed of⁴⁸:

- representatives of EU Member States, candidate countries and EEA countries;
- the Council of Europe;
- representatives of European qualifications stakeholders:
 - European social partners: BUSINESS EUROPE, European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME) the European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) and the Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public services (CEEP)
 - Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry (EUROCHAMBRES);
 - European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) ;
 - European Students' Union (ESU);
 - European University Association (EUA); and
 - Network of Head of Public Employment Services (PES).

The Commission chairs and manages the meetings, supported by Cedefop and the European Training Foundation. This support was considered by advisory group members to be very helpful. The Council of Europe (CoE) has a specific role in the EQF advisory group to ensure coherence between the EQF and the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

Overall, the group incorporates an appropriate range of stakeholders. This point was widely supported by interviewees, both members of the EQF advisory group and other stakeholders. Several interviewees suggested that the EQF advisory group should formalise cooperation with other relevant

⁴⁸ Source: Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities - European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (E02107) on <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail&groupID=2107>

DGs of the European Commission (DG EMPL and DG MARKT). This could be strengthened by reinforced internal coordination among DGs at the Commission.

Cooperation with stakeholders that may be able to bring additional perspective on the international comparison / recognition of qualifications (e.g. UNESCO) could also be formalised. Although this point was not directly addressed in terms of composition of the EQF advisory group, some interviewees suggested giving an observer seat in the EQF advisory group to these stakeholders.

Overall, EQF advisory group members considered that the advisory group was positioned at the right level (i.e. European level) and that their peers within the group had relevant backgrounds. This was confirmed in the case studies, where interviewees considered that advisory group members have the right level of expertise and background. Overall, there is a high level of commitment to and involvement in the advisory group, although the level of commitment and contribution varies between countries and between stakeholders.

5.1.1.2 Organisation of the EQF advisory group

The EQF advisory group is chaired by the European Commission (DG EAC). EQF members interviewed reported that DG EAC was carrying out this task well and **effectively ensured continuous progress in the work of the group**. They also reported that their suggestions and requests were taken into account by the Commission.

However, some interviewees⁴⁹ suggested that there is an opportunity to refocus the steering of the EQF advisory group. The EQF advisory group rules of procedure foresaw a greater role for members in steering the agenda and activities of the group, for instance with a 'bureau' composed by the three countries that form the EU Presidency Trio⁵⁰, together with social partners' representatives, with the Commission playing a secretariat role. These interviewees mentioned that this format would give more ownership of the process to participating countries, thus ensuring a more active involvement of participants during and between meetings. A few interviewees recommended that the Commission should rely more heavily on inputs and contributions from participants in the facilitation and steering of the advisory group, so as to reinforce ownership and active participation. This reflects a request for greater ownership from of the EQF advisory group, at least from some of its members. However, the effectiveness of such a steering bureau highly depends on its members' capacity to play this role. More ownership implies a level of interest in and commitment to peer exchange and 'buy in' to the group. This would also involve an increase in the workload of participants involved. **The extent to which the group is collectively ready to take on these additional responsibilities should be carefully assessed.**

Other areas for improvement were identified in the following aspects of the work of the EQF advisory group:

- Reinforce follow-up of activities to the EQF advisory group. Examples given included the presentation of outcomes of EQF pilot projects and PLAs to the EQF advisory group, but no follow-up on further results of these activities in the next EQF advisory group meetings. Interviewees suggested that the Commission could regularly follow-up on progress made in relation to those activities considered most relevant to advisory group members. The same recommendation was made for follow-up on comments made in reaction to a referencing report presentation.
- In terms of timing, interviewees claimed that the EQF advisory group meeting documents should be sent earlier to participants so that they have time to discuss issues and make decisions internally at national level in preparation for the meeting. Indicatively, two weeks in advance was mentioned as an appropriate timing for reception and internal discussion of meeting documents.

⁴⁹ Although this question was not part of the interview topic guide, five interviewees among EQF advisory group members – one social partner representative and four country representatives spontaneously requested an assessment of this opportunity to have the EQF advisory group steered by a bureau as foresees in the rules of procedure.

⁵⁰ Since 2007, the EU Presidency programme has been shared by three Member States – respectively holding one of three successive 6-month Presidencies - over an 18-month period. The objective of the Trio is to allow three successive Presidencies to work together over an extended period on a common agenda, in close-operation, thus having more time to set achievable targets than they would have under separate six month terms.

5.1.1.3 Activities and outputs of the EQF advisory group

The main role of the EQF advisory group is to steer the implementation of the framework, thereby ensuring that the referencing process is coherent and transparent and trustworthy. Through its work (consisting of a range of activities), the advisory group provides guidance to national authorities in their referencing to the EQF.

Overall, stakeholders interviewed considered that the format and functioning of the advisory group was adequate. Several interviewees considered that the EQF advisory group was an effective platform for supporting exchange of information and networking between countries. Some interviewees reported that the EQF advisory group meetings were a good opportunity for them to exchange formally and informally about issues encountered with the referencing process and the national qualifications framework in other countries. They also appreciate the peer review aspect of the meetings and its potential impact at national level. This was confirmed in the case study countries, in which it was considered that the work of the advisory group had proved helpful and that the group had fulfilled its role of coordination and following-up on countries' developments.

The work of the advisory group mainly takes place through:

- EQF advisory group meetings, complemented by
- Peer Learning Activities that give participants the opportunity to deepen some issues linked to the EQF implementation;
- EQF sub-groups (on establishing referencing criteria, on quality assurance and on international qualifications, for instance).

These EQF advisory group activities are supported by an online platform for sharing documents (EQF Implementation Virtual Community). The Virtual Community is mainly used in support of events organisation (calendar and meeting document sharing). Its library compiles the main documents related to the EQF and its implementation. It also targets EQF NCPs and members of EQF sub-groups. The Commission tool that hosts the Virtual Community – SINAPSE – offers additional functionalities, such as discussion groups and surveys. These functionalities have not been used so far, and data collected (surveys and interviews) does not suggest a need for additional activities using these functionalities. Moreover, ensuring effective use of these functionalities would require an important moderation effort, which is difficult to justify until an identified need has been established.

The EQF advisory group meetings are the main platform for exchange between the participating countries, the European Commission and representatives of other stakeholders. The group is active in ensuring EQF members are informed about policy developments in ESCO, with the Professional Qualifications Directive. The group also discusses the development of information and communication tools to support the EQG implementation, such as the EQF portal and a communication strategy for the EQF at national, European and international level.

The EQF advisory group also tackles specific issues such as:

- Linking qualifications issued by sectoral organisations to national qualifications frameworks or systems and to the EQF.
- Ensuring quality assurance and conditions for mutual trust specifically in relation to the EQF.
- Describing learning and transversal skills in terms of learning outcomes.

The EQF Advisory Group also discusses and informs its members about relevant EU developments in the field of education and training, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, etc.

The analysis below focuses on work and activities of the EQF advisory group under the following strands: establishing criteria and procedures for referencing national qualification levels to the EQF; discussing and providing feedback on national EQF referencing reports.

Establishment of criteria and procedures for referencing national qualification levels to the EQF

Trust and cooperation among stakeholders are essential in successfully developing NQFs and completing the EQF Referencing Process. In order to ensure that the referencing process is designed in such a way that it can be understood and trusted by all stakeholders, the EQF advisory group established a working group with the mandate to propose a set of criteria and procedures to guide this process.

The referencing criteria aim to ensure that the information and documents that are put into the public domain are validated by competent authorities, are relevant, transparent and comparable and generate trust. The criteria also provide a set of parameters for countries to design their referencing process.

Overall, the EQF advisory group has effectively supported the referencing process with the establishment of referencing criteria. The working group in charge of establishing the referencing criteria successfully completed its task, as the referencing criteria were endorsed by the EQF advisory group in early 2009.

When asked whether the referencing criteria have effectively contributed to making the referencing process more relevant, transparent and comparable in their country, a great majority of national stakeholders surveyed replied that this was the case⁵¹. About 60% of those stakeholders who have a significant knowledge and understanding of the EQF and its national implementation at national level said that the referencing criteria effectively supported the referencing process in their country. When the same question was asked to those who have been actively involved in the referencing process in their country, more than 80% of respondents said that the referencing criteria effectively supported the referencing process in their country.

Presentation of the referencing reports to and reviews by the EQF advisory group

In order for the referencing process to be trustworthy, there is a need for an agreed methodology and consistent application of that methodology. The presentation of the national EQF referencing reports and the extent to which the advisory group's feedback is taken into account in the national referencing processes are elements of this method.

All participating countries are expected to present a national referencing report to the EQF advisory group once the national referencing process has been completed. The national referencing report is discussed in the meeting of the EQF advisory group.

The presentation of the referencing report is one of the most valuable aspects of the EQF advisory group meetings. This was supported by a large majority of EQF advisory group members interviewed. These presentations allow members to benefit from experience in other countries and lessons learned from the referencing process. It also allows for them to monitor progress in referencing with regard to the coverage of the referencing (i.e. comprehensive frameworks versus those that cover only part of the qualifications landscape in the countries). The aim is to discuss what works particularly well, but also highlight any potential challenges and threats.

This working method (presentation of referencing report and peers' feedback) was new for advisory group members, as was the referencing process itself. The advisory group meetings represent a good opportunity for participants to learn about the referencing process (through the experience of others when they present their own reports) and to hear about the strengths and weaknesses of their own qualifications system in the European context, from the point of view of other countries,

In terms of the process, EQF advisory group members receive the referencing report one month before the scheduled presentation. Other countries have the opportunity to provide written comments before the meeting, so that the country presenting its report has the chance to prepare a response. One of the challenges of this exercise is to ensure that comments on a referencing report are based on a good understanding of the system presented. This implies important preparatory work is undertaken by group members, including getting familiar with the referencing report itself. There is a difficult balance for advisory group members providing comments on referencing reports between sufficiently taking the national context into account while also bearing in mind the comparability objectives behind the EQF.

Presentation of the referencing report has a motivating effect on participating countries. Peer pressure is perceived to contribute to driving the referencing process in terms of timing – although only to a limited extent given that the overall timetable for referencing was primarily driven by national considerations. Peer pressure was reported in most cases to have a tangible impact on the quality of the reports. Some countries reported that the 'referencing race' pushed some countries to submit and present reports that cover only part of the qualifications awarded in the country (e.g. Latvia), giving priority to the deadline over comprehensiveness. Peer pressure was also said to influence the way referencing was designed in the first place. Some countries reported that referencing would have been

⁵¹ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

done differently (i.e. more focused on national needs, without paying so much attention to the European dimension of qualifications) if it had not been for the perspective of presenting it to a European audience, thus driving the European dimension of qualifications. This dynamic in itself serves to justify the investment in organising and running the EQF advisory group. Although there are questions raised about the clarity of some referencing report content (e.g. detail about the national system and the methods used), the influence that presenting the reports has on the development of those reports is widely-acknowledged and is a determinant of the significant consistency and quality of approach that has been achieved.

According to interviewees, the level of interaction among members of the advisory group in the context of referencing reports presentation was quite high. The comments made on referencing reports were relevant and constructive, in particular from the point of view of those who had already presented their referencing report. Interviewees felt that discussion following the presentation of the reports addressed the key issues linked to each report, and entered into details of the reports. However, some interviewees pointed out that the most relevant comments came from experts from Cedefop and the Council of Europe rather than from peers in the EQF advisory group (with some notable exceptions), which limits the added value of the peer-to-peer exercise. This is linked to a more systematic and in-depth preparation work from these experts as well as a continuously built expertise about qualifications beyond the national level that country members of the EQF advisory group do not necessarily have.

Presentation of the reports also contributed to increasing and improving mutual understanding of qualifications systems among EQF countries. In case study countries, the expert opinion and recommendations provided in the context of referencing report presentations were welcomed at the national level, although interviewees in one country found that the advisory group remarks did not sufficiently take national circumstances into account. This is notable because the more widely-held view was that the referencing process provides an entry point into better understanding of different national systems. It was generally felt that while a referencing report in itself could not provide the insight that some stakeholders might have expected (in order to *really* understand the nuance of qualifications systems in other countries), it was nevertheless a useful tool for gaining comparable information and provided the basis gaining a better understanding. Crucially, the EQF advisory group (and the NCP group) was reported to provide the platform for peer exchange and learning to build on what emerged in the referencing reports and 'fill in the gaps' to understanding how qualifications systems work at national level.

A further challenge in the context of the open method of coordination is to find a balance between the presenting country's ownership of its referencing report and national qualification system and other countries' 'right to comment' in the context of the peer-to-peer exercise. There is a risk here that the effects of feedback received on a referencing report be quite limited. A potentially effective way to reinforce this effect would be to follow-up and systematically report on progress made towards implementations of feedback received on a referencing report. This would not force countries to implement, but ensure that the situation regarding implementation and the rationale for taking comments on board or not would be clearer to other members of the EQF advisory group.

Since the Presentation of the Danish report in 2011, comments on referencing report are summarised and recorded. Countries' commitment in reaction to this feedback and progress in their implementation is monitored by the EQF advisory group. However, **the room for action by the EQF advisory group to ensure follow-up remains limited.** This was felt by members of the EQF advisory group to be gap. Interviewees expressed concerns about the follow-up on implementation of comments to a referencing report presentation. Some interviewees reported that there was no formal follow-up on how countries addressed comments made to their referencing report. It was the case for instance in reaction to presentation of the French referencing report. Updates of the Maltese and Dutch referencing report were the only examples of a tangible reaction to comments made following the presentation of referencing reports. Some countries claimed they would amend their referencing report following an evaluation of the NQF (e.g. in Denmark), or the full establishment of the NQF (Latvia).

It is important to note that, beyond countries' commitment to amend their report, there is a general feeling among EQF advisory group members that the presentation and review of the referencing report was a one-off activity.

Peer Learning Activities

The PLAs are events to exchange information on different policy options to support reports on national education and training systems. They are organised as part of the Education and Training 2010 and 2020 Work Programmes.

Overall, the PLAs have contributed to convergence in thinking and approach across the Member States. PLAs are considered useful, in particular as they allow concrete discussions that are closer to the practices in place in participating countries. Two thirds of EQF advisory group members interviewed reported that they participated in one or more Peer Learning Activities, with some countries participating in more (up to eight for one country).

Interviewees who had participated in PLAs emphasised their usefulness, in particular the opportunity to exchange experience on practical questions and provide insight into practices of other countries, in the vein of the open method of coordination in education and training. These interviewees generally called for more PLAs. In terms of the focus of the PLAs, interviewees stressed the usefulness of recent PLAs focusing on a specific EQF level (e.g. PLAs focusing on levels 1-2 and on level 5). These were considered to be particularly beneficial as they give a sense of how the EQF works in practice.

While most advisory group members reported that the outcomes of PLAs are effectively shared with the group, some called for more follow-up on PLAs, so that they do not remain a one-off activity. The introduction of a regular follow-up on PLAs – beyond the usual reporting on outcomes of PLAs – to EQF advisory group members would ensure continuity of activities carried out under PLAs.

5.1.2 Implementation structures at national level: the EQF NCPs

This sub-chapter aims to clarify the extent to which the EQF NCPs implement the tasks as described in the EQF Recommendation.

The EQF Recommendation defines the role of NCPs as follows:

- referencing levels of qualifications within national qualifications systems to the EQF levels;
- ensuring that a transparent methodology is used to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF in order to facilitate comparisons between them on the one hand, and ensuring that the resulting decisions are published on the other;
- providing access to information and guidance to stakeholders on how national qualifications relate to the EQF through national qualifications systems; and
- promoting the participation of all relevant stakeholders including, in accordance with national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors and experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level.

The study for the European Parliament⁵² suggested that the way in which NCPs are set up differs from country to country. Some countries have an existing qualifications authority in place which can take on the NCP role (e.g. Ireland, Malta, Portugal, and United Kingdom). Others keep this role within the ministry of education who leads the referencing process (e.g. Finland, Hungary, Slovak Republic, and Spain). Some delegate this role to ministry agencies, but these may have different remits. For example, in Austria the NCP is an agency for international cooperation, while it is a research agency in Italy. In the Netherlands, a separate new body was set up. Data collected through this evaluation suggests that there is recognition that the NCP network brings together organisations with quite different responsibilities at national level and thus different leverage over national framework developments. The extent of their involvement in the referencing process varies by country, depending on the structural and organisational aspects at national level described above. This influences the extent to which NCPs are perceived as a reference point for information, guidance and advice regarding the implementation of the EQF in the country and, indirectly, their room for action in promoting and disseminating information about the EQF and its implementation and the effectiveness of these actions.

It is possible to assess the contribution of the NCP function in relation to the following areas: Driving or supporting the referencing process – their roles and resources and efficiency in supporting the referencing process; Ensuring transparency - efficiency of the NCPs in defining the referencing

⁵² State of Play of the European Qualifications Framework implementation, European Parliament, 2012

method and monitoring its application and efficiency and promoting and disseminating information about the EQF and the national referencing; and Engaging stakeholders. NCPs efficiency with regard to these roles is set out below.

5.1.2.1 The NCP role in driving or supporting the referencing process and in ensuring the transparency of referencing

Overall, NCPs have effectively played their role in the referencing process, although with substantial variation between countries. All EQF NCPs interviewed reported on their involvement in the referencing process. In most countries, the EQF NCP was responsible for coordinating/leading (parts of) the referencing process and closely cooperated with the responsible ministry and other relevant stakeholders. However, the extent of this involvement differs substantially from one country to another. In Denmark, it was decided that the role of the NCP would be to support the referencing process, led by the Ministry in charge of education. In this case, the NCP focused on its communication and information role rather than its roles linked to the referencing process. This was also the case in Poland, where the NCP, hosted by the Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange, focused on stakeholder involvement, communication and information activities, while the Educational Research Institute played a leading role in the referencing process and the NQF project in general.

Some NCPs have played a much stronger role in the referencing process. This is the case for instance in France, where the NCP is hosted by the authority in charge of qualifications at national level (National Professional Qualifications Committee) and of the qualifications registrar (National Professional Qualifications Registrar). This weight is reinforced by the fact that this authority also represents France in the EQF advisory group. This translates into the NCP being widely perceived as the 'obvious' counterpart for questions related to qualifications in general, and for the NQF and the EQF in particular. A similar situation occurred in Latvia, where the NCP (hosted by the national qualifications authority, also the EQF advisory group member) was often referred to as the 'motor' of national referencing, as well as in Romania and Ireland.

Organisational aspects therefore tend to determine the extent of the role of the NCP in the referencing process, notably in relation to the nature of the organisation hosting the NCP and how central its role is to qualifications more generally at national level. Other factors were mentioned by interviewees. When asked about the reasons driving the extent of their involvement, a few interviewees indicated that they were confronted with a lack of human and financial resources, which limited the NCP's action and prevented them from pursuing certain activities. This was the case, for instance, in Spain.

Regarding the transparency of referencing, NCPs are considered having carried out this role effectively. Almost two thirds of respondents to the stakeholders' survey said that the EQF NCP in their country has ensured transparency of the referencing process⁵³. This was confirmed by interviewees among EQF advisory group members and other stakeholders interviewed in case study countries. This was particularly the case for countries that had completed the referencing process. It also helps to be explicit about why different organisations are taking on specific roles at national level. For example, in Denmark, stakeholders' involvement was organised in a transparent way, making it clear for stakeholders that the approach chosen was the 'best possible option', thus contributing to trust in the referencing process among stakeholders.

5.1.2.2 The NCPs role in promoting and disseminating information

Promoting and disseminating information about the NQF/EQF processes to stakeholders is one of the most important roles of the EQF NCPs. When asked how NCPs ensured transparency of referencing, stakeholders at national level referred to their communication and information activities⁵⁴.

Overall, this role has been carried out effectively and NCPs are an important source of information about national and European qualifications developments in their country. In total, 60% of the respondents of the stakeholder survey indicated that the NCP in their Member State had actively informed them about progress with the referencing process⁵⁵. However, 25% of respondents felt that they were not proactively informed and 15% were unfamiliar with the NCP, as such. This partly reflects the potentially larger audience for NCP activities at national level and the wider question of which

⁵³ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁵⁴ See sub-chapter 4.1.2

⁵⁵ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

types of stakeholder need to be informed about what areas of development. In most countries, the dynamic of national framework development tends to revolve around a relatively small number of experts / bodies – to whom the EQF in the development phase is most relevant. These are primarily ministries (in charge of education, higher education and/or vocational training) and qualifications authorities.

Nearly all EQF NCPs interviewed reported using a national website to disseminate information about the EQF or intend to launch their site shortly. A national webpage is considered to be one of the main forms of formal communication, in addition to written channels (e.g. leaflets, brochures) and events (e.g. meetings, working groups, and seminars).

The stakeholder survey confirmed that almost half of respondents who had been informed about the EQF had been so through information sessions organised by the NCP, more than a quarter through the national (or NCP) website and 13% were informed through ad-hoc email⁵⁶. Out of these respondents, only 1% were informed through other communication channels - mainly through informal meetings or the organisation's network.

Subsequently, when the respondents were asked about the most effective ways of promoting and disseminating information about the EQF/NQF process, more than a third of the respondents found a national website to be an effective channel. Just under a third of survey respondents preferred information sessions and a fifth of respondents most valued a national newsletter. Less than 10% of respondents prioritised receiving ad-hoc information by email and being informed through other methods. This information is in line with the information collected from the interviews which confirmed that the majority of NCPs organise information sessions and communication via a national website.

Almost three quarters of respondents consider the NCP in their Member State to be the main source of information on the national referencing process and over half consider the NCP to be the main source of information about EQF implementation in Europe. Those who did not think the EQF NCP was their main source of information received/gathered information on the NQF/EQF processes mainly through other sources, including Bologna Experts, Cedefop, the European Commission (including the EQF Portal), the EQF Advisory group and national authorities (ministries).

Another way to assess the efficiency of the EQF NCPs in promoting and disseminating information is to look at stakeholders' general level of awareness of the EQF and whether they understand what is in it for them.

5.1.2.3 *The NCP role in engaging stakeholders*

Stakeholders' awareness, understanding and involvement in the EQF

According to the stakeholder survey, while awareness about the national developments linked to the implementation of EQF is relatively high in participating countries, awareness about the EQF as a European tool is limited to qualifications stakeholders. Several countries indicate that NQF/EQF visibility is low among specific target groups, for instance the general public and employers/employees, trade unions, universities, students, schools or pupils. Only one country considers that the NQF/EQF visibility among employers and employees is relatively high in its country. Other countries reported that the NQF and EQF are particularly visible among "insiders" (i.e. institutions or organisations working on/with NQF/EQF, such as education providers) and it is rather limited among the general public.

Case studies also verify that awareness about the EQF beyond qualifications stakeholders is limited. In Germany, awareness about the NQF is high among a wide range of stakeholders, while awareness about the EQF is quite low, in particular among teachers and trainers, but also the general public. These groups are considered as a priority for action in the future to ensure that the ultimate target groups - such as teachers and students at all qualification levels and ages, but also training providers, unions and employers - know of the benefits of the NQF and the EQF.

In Latvia, all the interviewees confirmed that awareness of the EQF/NQF remains very low among the general public at large. The NCP recognised that raising this awareness is a priority for the future. It noted, for instance that using EQF to promote the national qualifications system was ineffective, as the awareness of the EQF among general public remains very low. However, it is important to note that in Latvia, while awareness about the EQF/NQF remains very low among general population, the

⁵⁶ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

stakeholders are largely aware of and understand the potential benefits of the frameworks for lifelong learning and mobility within and beyond the country.

Even in countries with relatively well-established and prominent national frameworks, there were questions raised about the appropriate timing of wider EQF dissemination. Some stakeholders felt that the EQF was extremely beneficial in providing a tangible benefit to users of the NQF (by directly supporting international mobility for individuals and international recruitment for employers), but that there was a risk in over-promising the benefits of the EQF translation tool before all countries had referenced to the framework. The wider visibility of the EQF at a particular point in time is therefore directly related to achieving the objectives of the Recommendation.

Interest in and understanding of the EQF varied greatly from country to country. Many stakeholders contacted for interviews in the context of the case studies reported they knew about the EQF, but reported that they knew very little about it and about the links between the EQF and the national qualifications system in their countries. This was less the cases in countries that had already referenced. This suggests that the EQF is rather abstract to the wider body of stakeholders during the referencing process, which is not particularly surprising – especially given that, in practice, the development of national frameworks and EQF referencing was undertaken in parallel in many cases.

Limited understanding about the EQF cannot be linked to a specific target group. In the online surveys⁵⁷, those respondents who stated they knew about the EQF but had a limited understanding of its implementation in their country (11% of respondents) had various backgrounds⁵⁸.

There is a wider question, which remains unanswered, about whether this lack of understanding and/or engagement is problematic in the long-run. It is arguably rational in the short-term to focus effort on internal discussion and technical development to underpin referencing, rather than wider marketing, in order to meet (or get close to) the timetable set out in the EQF Recommendation. However, this may well pose significant challenges in some countries when they reach the implementation phase. One the key tests for national frameworks and the related credibility of the EQF in future is likely to be how effectively national stakeholders promote the influence of new national frameworks. This might be more challenging if those frameworks have been developed without the active participation of all future framework users.

Almost all stakeholders surveyed assessed that their understanding of the EQF was good⁵⁹. When asked about how confident they were about the EQF reaching its objectives, more than half of them said they trusted that it was on the right track to do so in the future⁶⁰. **This shows that those who know the EQF largely trust it.**

Methods and tools used by NCPs to ensure stakeholder engagement

Surveys and consultations were the most common methods used by NCPs to engage stakeholders⁶¹. Just over a third of stakeholders mentioned brainstorming sessions as a method by which they were engaged. This is in line with the information collected through desk research and interviews. Most, if not all, countries made use of stakeholder consultations or surveys as part of the referencing process.

Among case study countries, stakeholder engagement was particularly effective in Germany. The process was extremely formalised and structured in line with the German tradition of consensus-based policy making. Stakeholder engagement is perceived to be the only acceptable approach for implementation of the EQF in the country. Overall, stakeholder involvement is considered to be effective in this country.

Respondents to the survey reported a high level of interest in being involved in the referencing process. Half of respondents had requested to be involved in the referencing process⁶². Out of the respondents who had requested to be involved, more than three quarters felt that they had been given

⁵⁷ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁵⁸ Public authorities (Ministry) and other public Institutions (lifelong learning agency, qualifications authority, quality assurance agency, guidance and information agency), independent research or consultancy organisations, education and training providers, social partners, employers, and student/learners

⁵⁹ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶⁰ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶¹ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶² See **Error! Reference source not found.**

an opportunity to make an effective contribution to the referencing process, whilst 16% felt they had not. This shows that NCPs were generally effective in engaging most interested parties.

Several countries faced challenges in changing the mind-set of stakeholders and in convincing them of the benefit of the EQF. In particular, interviewees reported a general lack of interest in the NQF/EQF among stakeholders, and particularly in the general and higher education sector, as well as among employers.

Overall, stakeholders believed that their respective NCP has fulfilled its mission of coordinating the referencing process at the national level. The great majority of stakeholders noted that the NCP work has successfully brought together organisations with quite different responsibilities at national level. Events organised by the NCP were assessed as relevant by the stakeholders consulted. It was said that the work of the NCP in general has helped creating a general understanding and support for the EQF among the relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training.

However, regarding the dissemination role of the NCP, the dissemination of the information was said to be too narrow – i.e. too much targeted at stakeholders in the field of education and training. The general public was therefore not sufficiently targeted in the opinion of the interviewees. Dissemination means were very diverse (websites, publications, newspaper articles, social networks), however, not sufficiently targeted to the general public in some of the countries. This point was accepted by many of the NCPs that were interviewed. Some reported rather reasonably that more *passive* engagement could only ever have limited effect on a general audience in the short-term – and especially where the NQF was still under development and its benefits could not be realised by the population at large. Others felt that while it was important promote the EQF as widely as possible as early as possible, there needed to be reasonable expectations about what this could achieve unless it was directly connected to engagement relating to the NQF.

Interviewees also indicated little support from employers and employees. This becomes particularly apparent in times of economic downturn when employers and employees have different priorities. When interviewed, employers' representatives stated that their interest in the EQF was quite limited, although they did not contest that employers were part of the ultimate target groups of the EQF. One interviewee stated that the focus of the EQF should remain on education and training systems rather than on the labour market, and that this objective should be stated more clearly. It is likely that the EQF will in time become increasingly relevant employers, but in the context of specific situations – such as international recruitment (which is unlikely to be relevant to all employers) or in discussions on sectoral and international qualifications (which is more likely to engage particular types of employer and in particular sectors). The more general stakeholder engagement activities undertaken by NCPs to date are therefore somewhat removed from the kind of dialogue that is likely to be of interest to employers.

In case study countries, social partner engagement in the referencing process has been perceived to be more effective in Germany and Ireland and, to a lesser extent, in France. Employer involvement was considered less effective in Latvia, Poland and Romania. Reasons given covered partly failure to take social partners' feedback into account (Poland), lack of contribution from stakeholders (Romania) and lack of awareness (Latvia).

5.1.3 The EQF Portal

The EQF Portal presents a functionality that allows comparing qualifications levels⁶³. The comparison function only presents information about national qualifications in a limited number of countries (nine of the 16 countries that have referenced their national qualifications to the EQF by the end of 2012). This function – which is fully operational but does not cover all participating countries⁶⁴ – was considered by interviewees as having a high potential to increase the visibility and readability of the EQF. The full potential of this functionality will be more visible once information from more countries' national qualifications becomes available.

Beyond the comparison function, the Commission proposed a new search function for the EQF portal⁶⁵. The search function was still under development at the time of this evaluation. It will allow

⁶³ http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/compare_en.htm

⁶⁴ Available for nine countries only

⁶⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/search_en.htm

citizens to search for information via the common European interface on individual qualifications that are related to the EQF via national qualifications levels. The conceptual development of this function within the portal is expected to be finalised by the end of 2013. In order to fully develop this function, countries need to develop and relate their national qualifications databases. Some countries already have qualifications databases, while others are still to invest in development. Only few interviewees commented on the detailed features of these future developments (category fields), partly because they were not fully aware of them at the time they were interviewed. Overall, interviewees that commented on the EQF Portal acknowledged the need for the planned development of this search function.

5.2 Financial Support to EQF related activities

This sub-chapter focuses on EU support to EQF pilot projects and then to EQF NCP activities.

5.2.1 Support to EQF pilot projects

This sub-chapter aims to clarify the interaction between the pilot projects work and results and the national NQF development and EQF referencing processes. It also relates to the extent to which the results and outcomes of the projects have been actively used to inform policy work at EU level (Open Method of Coordination) or at national level in terms of the implementation of the NQF and/or EQF.

The pilot projects were transnational in nature and were, in most cases, led by education and training providers (mainly higher education institutions) and European sector organisations. Overall, the EQF pilot projects were felt to cover relevant topics (referencing levels and self-certification; linking sector qualifications and frameworks to NQFs and the EQF; the links between Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education; provision of guidance and supporting materials, etc.) and to be in line with the needs of EQF stakeholders.

Many of the topics covered by the pilot projects are as relevant or even more relevant as the EQF process moves beyond the point that the majority of countries have presented their first referencing report.

Use of findings and results and impact on implementation and policy development

Awareness about EQF pilot projects was quite high, while the actual use of their outcomes was somewhat limited. Interviews show that all advisory group members and NCPs were aware of the implementation of EQF Pilot Projects. However, in as many as thirteen countries, the results of the EQF Pilot projects were not used at all to feed into NQF and EQF processes. In some cases, interviewees reported that the projects' findings and results were implemented and disseminated too late to have an impact considering countries' relatively early referencing to the EQF. In other cases, it was noted that it was difficult to incorporate work that might relate to a specific sector or area of learning in a detailed way to the broader, whole system approach necessitated by NQF/EQF development.

Advisory group members and NCPs in nine countries indicated that the findings and results of the EQF Pilot Projects had been used in the EQF and NQF process and mostly fed into the Referencing Report. In Malta, the ZOOM pilot project facilitated the alignment of qualifications to the NQF and the EQF. This project focused on EQF-level six with regard to the engineering sector and developed a transparent procedure to facilitate the classification of qualifications to the NQF/EQF in this sector. In Sweden, the PROOF project was used as an example of implementation and use of the NQF and EQF.

Beyond the referencing process, results of EQF pilot projects were reported to have impacted on policy development in the following ways:

- Project products were used to inform national-level discussions and consultations (e.g. in Italy, an EQF pilot project contributed to national-level consultation on labour reform, especially regarding the implementation of the EQF levels and its application within the recognition of non-formal and informal learning).
- Informing the national strategy for lifelong learning.
- Refining the methodology for developing occupational qualification standards.
- Awareness raising and network building.

This is confirmed by findings from the online survey of EQF pilot projects leaders and partners. Almost half of the respondents to the EQF project survey indicated that the pilot projects had impacted on the policy development in their country. Almost a third, however, felt that the projects had not influenced policy development⁶⁶.

Regarding implementation, more than one third of the survey respondents indicated that the EQF pilot projects facilitated implementation. Around 15% of the respondents said they felt the projects did not facilitate implementation⁶⁷.

Examples provided included the following:

- In Lithuania, some findings of the SECCOMPAT project and EQF-PROQS project - related to the principles of transnational comparison and referencing of qualifications - were taken into account in the process of referencing the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework to the EQF.
- In Italy, participation in METAL QF and SQUARES projects, through a transversal (informal) dissemination event after the formal end of the project, provided an input to the Region of Veneto (the Department of Labour and the Department of Education and Training) to launch 46 projects at regional level to include EQF referencing and descriptors in formal education, vocational training and to start a shared process for the recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning. The outcomes of the projects were also used to contribute to the nation-wide consultations concerning labour reform in Italy, with particular regard to the implementation of EQF level and its application within validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- In Denmark, the outcomes of the EHC project - which focused on qualifications in the hairdressing sector - are recognised as the Danish training system for hairdressers.

Regarding the impact of the EQF pilot projects at EU level, more than a one third of the respondents to the EQF project survey indicated that the projects impacted on policy development at EU level. Almost one fifth of respondents indicated that EQF projects did not have an impact on their developments⁶⁸. Respondents mentioned for instance that pilot projects overall allowed a better awareness and understanding of the compatibility between frameworks as well as the existing differences, thus **contributing to acceptance of variation in the EQF implementation at national level**.

In terms of implementation, advisory group members and NCPs in nine countries reported that the EQF pilot projects influenced policy development and/or informed implementation. Most of these countries said that the findings and results of the projects fed into the referencing report. In the hairdressing sector, the EHC project outcomes were formalised in an agreement between partners in the social dialogue in the personal services sector establishing common goal for national training

Appropriate dissemination of projects' findings and results

The evaluation evidence shows that all advisory group members and NCPs were aware of the existence of EQF Pilot Projects⁶⁹. The situation is sparser regarding the depth of their understanding about the content of the projects, their activities, findings and results. In most cases, stakeholders outside the advisory group members and NCPs were unaware of the EQF pilot projects. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the overall dissemination strategies of the EQF pilot projects.

The channels by which information was disseminated also varied a lot between countries, and from project to project. The EQF pilot project coordinators and partners who responded to the EQF Project Survey indicated that the main channels used to disseminate project results were final dissemination events (more than one third of respondents) and dedicated project websites (almost one third of respondents)⁷⁰. The former provides a very tangible approach to dissemination, but reflects an intrinsic difficulty in sharing messages from a time-bound, one-off project. In practice, however, these events were not necessarily at a point in time when the learning was needed by those undertaking EQF

⁶⁶ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶⁷ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶⁸ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁶⁹ Interviews carried out at national level for the case-studies and country fiches

⁷⁰ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

referencing or development NQFs. The pilot projects may, as a consequence, be somewhat disconnected from wider and later EQF developments.

The EQF Newsletter, project partner organisation websites and other channels (such as articles in European Journal of Qualifications, book publications, day-to-day contacts with clients, letters sent out by the Ministry) were used to much less of an extent⁷¹. Interestingly enough, this finding about the EQF newsletter is not in line with stakeholders' views about the EQF newsletter as a source of information about pilot projects. In total, 85% of respondents to the stakeholders' survey considered the EQF Newsletter to be a useful source to receive information about EQF pilot projects⁷².

Dissemination activities targeted primarily national authorities/ministries (more than a quarter of respondents), international sectoral bodies and EU stakeholder organisations (respectively one fifth of responses). Other stakeholders, including research agencies, national level stakeholders (e.g. employer associations, trade unions), Lifelong Learning Programme agencies, VET provider organisation, organisation's network, banks, national sector skills councils were targeted to a lesser extent.

5.2.2 Support to EQF NCPs

The Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) provides grant funding for NCPs to support their activities in 2010, 2011 and 2012.

This sub-chapter aims to identify how this co-funding contributes to fulfilling the NCP role – and the importance of this funding for the overall operation of the NCP. In particular, the assessment regards the importance of this financial support as a basis for continuity of activity compared to what could be expected without the action grants.

Type of activities covered

The most common activities organised by EQF NCPs include:

- organisation of large events (e.g. launch/dissemination conference, stakeholder conferences, forums, general conferences) were organised in 18 countries (both 2010 and 2011);
- developing or translating the referencing report in seventeen countries (2011);
- steering group meetings, expert meetings, working meetings and other meetings aiming to coordinate and steer the referencing process were held in 13 countries in 2010 and five in 2011;
- development of dissemination/communication/information materials in 11 countries in 2010 and 13 countries in 2011;
- meetings with other EQF NCPs/EU-level actors in 7 countries in 2010 and 17 in 2011;
- development of a national EQF/NQF website in four countries in 2010 and nine countries in 2011;
- (feasibility) study/analysis in four countries in 2010 and three in 2011;
- stakeholder consultations in two countries;
- development of referencing methodology in two countries;
- development of a qualifications database in one country in 2010 and five in 2011; and
- evaluations in two countries in 2011.

Budgets and spending

The budget and spending for 2010-2012 is shown in Table 5.1. It shows that, overall, two thirds of the amount engaged for NCP activities have been actually spent by NCPs. This combined with the fact that only part of the budget available for NCP activities is requested (for instance, in 2012, only 68% of the amount available for NCP activities has been requested) suggests that there is a mismatch between what the NCPs plan to do when they apply for the grant and what they manage to do within the given timeframe.

⁷¹ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁷² See **Error! Reference source not found.**

Table 5.1 NCP activity grants awarded / spent 2010-2012

Call	Beneficiaries	Awarded (EUR)	Total paid (EUR)	%
2010	25 (AT, BE(Fr), BE(Nl), BG, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, GR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LV, MT, NL, NO, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK)	1,412,389	995,477	70%
2011	23 (AT, BG, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EL, FI, HR, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK)	1,579,353	891,090	56%
<i>Sub-total 2010-2011</i>		<i>2,991,742</i>	<i>1,886,567</i>	<i>63%</i>
2012	29 (AT, BE(Fr), BE(Nl), BG, CZ, DE, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LV, MT, NL, NO, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK)	1,955,815	Unknown (end of eligibility period: 31 December 2013)	NA
<i>Total 2010-2012</i>		<i>4,947,557</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>

Source: EACEA

Management and operations

Only a few countries reported issues linked to management and operations of the grant, suggesting that, apart from their limited use, NCP grants have been managed efficiently overall.

One country (Denmark) stated that it decided not to or had not been able to apply for a grant to support the activities of its NCP due to an incompatibility between the format of the NCP grant and the organisation of the Danish governance model with regard to the NQF.

No NCP considered that amount available was insufficient, although one NCP reported not applying because it considered that the amount available through NCP grants did not justify the effort required to apply for the grant and manage it. In another case, a NCP did not apply for a grant because of a lack of resources internally to prepare the grant application.

In many cases, NCPs reported that the NCP grant was an important source of funding to secure NCP activities, although data about actual spending suggests that it is the case only to a limited extent. In Latvia, the NCP linked the effectiveness of activities with the availability of NCP funding and stressed that it is important for beneficiaries to have the grant available at the appropriate time (i.e. when they need it most).

Outcomes and impacts

Although the NCP final activity reports present information about objectives and effects of the NCP grants at operational level, there is little information about the outcomes and expected impacts of these activities. There is persuasive evidence from the case studies in some countries that highlights the perceived contribution of the grant activities, although this is not easily measurable.

In Germany, for example, symposia (e.g. regarding the learning outcome orientation), workshops (e.g. regarding non-formal learning) have been (co-)funded through NCP activity grants and are perceived to be of increasing importance in the future to ensure a broad information dissemination to a wider public. Germany is also planning to develop an online qualifications database. Latvia also plans to use future funds from NCP activity grants to develop an online qualifications database.

NCP funding is an opportunity for the Commission to collect valuable data about the take up of the NQF and EQF (e.g. capturing the number of participants in EQF-related events compared to invitees; using these events to survey participants about the way they see the EQF and NQF; capturing data about the use of national qualifications websites, etc.). Provision of this data could be a condition for receiving the NCP grant.

5.3 Conclusions on the efficiency of the EQF and its implementation structure

Findings on the efficiency of the EQF are summarised below:

- **The governance of the EQF advisory group:**
 - The EQF advisory group meets the purpose of “soft control/guidance” of national referencing processes, and fulfils its role in terms of ensuring trust and common understanding among the participating countries.
 - The presentation of the referencing reports is arguably the most valuable aspect of the advisory group’s work.
 - The EQF advisory group, together with its sub-groups and with the contribution of Cedefop and ETF, have also provided practical support to the referencing process.
 - The EQF advisory group is also an effective way to ensure networking, peer-learning and the sharing of experiences among participating countries.
 - The European Commission plays a very important role in managing the work of the EQF advisory group (agenda setting, chairing meetings, reporting, organisation and logistics).
- **The governance of NCPs:** NCPs are implementing their tasks as described in the EQF Recommendation in an effective way, with the important caveat that, in many cases, the NCPs have focused only on part of their assigned tasks (depending on their countries’ progress regarding the implementation of the EQF). The extent of their involvement in the referencing process varies by country, depending on the organisational aspect of qualifications at national level. This influences the extent to which NCPs are perceived as a single point of contact for information, guidance and advice regarding qualifications in the country and, indirectly, their room for action in promoting and disseminating information about the EQF and its implementation and the effectiveness of these actions.
- **The efficiency of NCP grants:** EQF NCP grants have been used to support a wide range of EQF-related activities. This has primarily involved communication activities targeting a large audience, such as hosting conferences, setting up websites and developing dissemination tools. To a lesser extent it has also included activities to support effective management, including methodology design, stakeholder consultations, feasibility studies and evaluations. The grants have been used to a limited extent so far (about two thirds of the amount available has been requested) and there is little evidence on how effectively they have contributed to the implementation of the EQF.
- **The effectiveness of EQF pilot projects:** Overall, the EQF pilot projects have covered themes relevant to EQF implementation. However, the use of project outcomes has been limited. While participation is clearly beneficial to project partners and their institutions, and although there are examples of effects at sector level and on policy development and implementation at national level, the outcomes of EQF pilot projects are not systematically taken into account at European level. Similarly, the dissemination strategies of the EQF pilot projects have reached EQF insiders effectively, but their impact beyond these core stakeholders is rather limited.

Recommendations on this evaluation theme are presented in Chapter 9 Conclusions and Recommendations.

6 Relevance of the EQF

This chapter presents findings in relation to the relevance of the EQF Recommendation. As such, it looks at whether the Recommendation, its main features (structure and content) and its objectives were adapted to the need to improve transparency and facilitate recognition of qualifications.

The chapter covers these issues in relation to the following sections:

- The relevance of the principles and structure of the EQF to national contexts (6.1)
- The relevance of the policy instrument to achieving its stated objectives (6.2)
- The relevance and impact of the EQF in the context of wider EU goals (6.3).

6.1 Relevance of the principles and structure of the EQF

This sub-chapter focuses on the extent to which the principles and structure of the EQF were appropriate with regard to the qualifications situations in participating countries and the objectives pursued by the EQF Recommendation. The first part focuses on the extent to which the level-based structure and the use of learning outcomes to describe these levels have been relevant in the national context (6.1.1). The second part assesses in greater detail how the national systems mapped in the EQF (6.1.2). The last sub-chapter will cover issues linked to how comprehensive are the national frameworks being referenced the EQF (6.1.3).

6.1.1 Relevance of the EQF system of levels and appropriateness of learning outcome descriptors

The EQF is structured around eight common reference levels and each level is described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences using learning outcomes. The EQF levels and descriptors are presented in Annex II of the EQF Recommendation.

In order to assess whether this structure of eight levels and the use of descriptors have been in line with the realities of the national education systems, one needs to assess the extent to which the structure and level have been in line with the needs of the EQF stakeholders.

The number of EQF levels is generally well-adapted to national qualifications system and to the needs of the national EQF stakeholders. In the online survey targeting EQF stakeholders, respondents were asked whether the number of EQF levels was sufficient to encompass all kinds and levels of qualifications at national level. Four out of five survey respondents (82%) considered this to be the case⁷³. This was particularly true for respondents from countries that had not referenced to the EQF by the end of 2011⁷⁴ (89% vs. 71% for respondents from countries that referenced earlier).

This is likely to reflect a combination of factors, including:

- Countries that had qualifications systems / framework in place at the time of the EQF Recommendation with a different systems of levels finding it more difficult to reference these existing frameworks to the EQF compared to those countries that had no framework in place (and which had generally decided to develop an eight-level NQF).
- Greater experience among the first countries to reference in on-going implementation of a national framework (i.e. testing the applicability of levels in practice).

Around 10% of respondents to the EQF stakeholder survey felt that the number of EQF levels was insufficient. These respondents encompassed eight countries⁷⁵.

⁷³ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁷⁴ This includes all countries but UK, Malta, Ireland, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Estonia, Portugal, Czech Republic, Belgium (Flanders), Latvia and Lithuania – which referenced before the end of 2011 – and Luxembourg and Turkey – which did not contribute to the survey

⁷⁵ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

In most cases, the respondents represented only a minority of the respondents from their country, with the exception of four countries, where there was a concentration of views:

- The UK, which stands out for having 41% of national respondents believing that the number of EQF levels is insufficient to cover all kinds and levels of qualifications⁷⁶.
- Sweden: 29% of respondents (2 out of 7)
- Austria: 25% of respondents (2 out of 8)
- Netherlands: 14% of respondents (2 out of 14).

This suggests that the appropriateness of the eight levels is clearly a matter for debate in some countries, but there is no clear evidence that it is intrinsically problematic in any country.

Table 6.1 Responses to survey question about the appropriateness of the number of EQF levels to cover qualifications in participating countries

	Yes		No		Don't know		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
All national respondents	138	82%	17	10%	13	8%	168	100%
Respondents from countries that had not referenced to the EQF by the end of 2011	93	89%	6	6%	6	6%	105	100%
Respondents from countries that had referenced to the EQF by the end of 2011	45	71%	11	17%	7	11%	63	100%

ICF GHK, EQF stakeholder survey

Those respondents who considered the number of EQF levels to be insufficient in the above countries to cover qualifications in their country were asked why. Respondents reported the following:

- By design (and because they have to accommodate various qualification situations) the definitions of the EQF levels are too broad.
- Descriptors correspond to more than one education sub-system, e.g. for VET certificates or for non-formal/informal education.
- Specifically about level 1, the descriptors are too ambitious: people with a low or non-formal qualification cannot fulfil all descriptors although they are job-fit and employed (e.g. absence of basic knowledge about a foreign language).

These comments mainly relate to the learning outcome descriptors rather than the number of levels itself. They also relate to a small minority of respondents.

The same trend was observed in questions related to the appropriateness of the learning outcomes descriptors. The vast majority of respondents (87%) believe that the learning outcome descriptors contained in Annex II of the EQF recommendation effectively reflect the system of qualifications at national level, or do some with only minor exceptions⁷⁷. Only 9% of respondents point out significant exceptions, or do not believe that the learning outcome descriptors reflect qualifications systems at national level. In some cases, views are likely to be untested – if the use of learning outcomes at national level is not well-established.

There is no substantial difference in views on the relevance of learning outcome descriptors according to level of respondent awareness of EQF implementation. Respondents from 11 different countries were less confident in the learning outcome descriptors' capacity to reflect qualifications systems at national level, but in most cases this was the view of a single survey respondent. Even where multiple respondents at national level thought this was the case, this only ranges from 14-25% of all respondents from that country. None of the learning outcomes descriptors (knowledge, skills and competence) was highlighted as more problematic than the others.

⁷⁶ Note that there are multiple frameworks within the UK reflecting the different UK nations.

⁷⁷ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

Data from the interviews support the survey results. Indeed, interviewees reported that some of the mismatches between EQF levels and NQF levels are linked to the EQF learning outcomes descriptors:

- Interviewees also identified problems related to the broad definition of descriptors (e.g. in Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland), thus generating a difficulty in defining national descriptors that are coherent with the EQF learning outcomes descriptors. For instance, in Czech Republic, the first definition of competencies proposed by the Czech NCP, which stemmed from a stakeholder consultation, were initially not descriptors in the EQF sense. Wider discussions took place afterwards which enabled to further improve the definition of descriptors (for all NQF levels).
- In France there is no level 1 because the descriptors for level 1 were not in line with the purpose of the national framework of these countries. For instance, level 1 was not considered in line with the objective to focus on vocational qualifications in the French framework. France, however, did not consider this point a barrier to the development of a NQF, as long as countries have the flexibility to decide whether their NQF is to match the number of qualifications levels in the EQF.
- Bulgaria wanted to include pre-school/basic primary levels, and level 1 descriptors could not accommodate this sub-system, therefore Bulgaria created an additional level 0.

Once again, this suggests that while there are dissenters, the majority view in all countries is that the learning outcome descriptors are appropriate.

This was confirmed in the case studies, where the number of EQF levels and the descriptors were considered appropriate. Even in countries that had a national framework with a different number of levels to meet national needs, stakeholders understood the need for the EQF to accommodate all national qualifications systems, and as a result, not perfectly match the structure of any of the national systems.

6.1.2 Mapping national system to specific EQF levels

As indicated above, in most cases, the specific EQF levels were felt to be adapted to the systems of qualifications at national level. At least three quarters of survey respondents felt this to be the case for each of the EQF levels 1-8⁷⁸.

Respondents identifying issues were typically in the minority within their countries. Perceived issues in relation to the mapping of specific levels do not, as a rule, reflect a national position. Given that issues were identified by 5-13% of respondents at each level (except for level 5), it is noteworthy that this relates to around a third or more of countries in each case.

Excluding countries with fewer than three national survey respondents⁷⁹ and where issues were only raised by a single respondent, the only situations in which at least a third of survey respondents in each country reported difficulties were as follows:

- Level 1: Iceland (67% reported difficulties); Slovakia (40%); Finland (33%)
- Level 2: Slovakia (40%); Finland (33%)
- Level 3: Norway (33%)
- Level 4: Netherlands (43%)
- Level 5: Poland (71%); Czech Republic (67%); Denmark (67%); Bulgaria (50%); Slovakia (40%); Hungary (38%); Norway (33%)
- Level 6: Ireland (40%); Slovakia (40%)
- Level 7: None
- Level 8: Slovakia (40%).

⁷⁸ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁷⁹ Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Malta, Slovenia, Switzerland

Table 6.2 EQF levels not felt to map across to the national system of qualifications (Number and percentage of respondents / countries)

EQF Level	Number of respondents reporting that level does not translate		Number of countries with at least one respondent reporting that level does not translate		Number of self-declared EQF experts reporting that level does not translate	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Level 1	22	13%	14	45%	8	16%
Level 2	14	8%	12	39%	4	8%
Level 3	14	8%	11	35%	4	8%
Level 4	19	11%	12	39%	7	14%
Level 5	36	21%	18	58%	13	27%
Level 6	18	11%	13	42%	6	12%
Level 7	9	5%	9	29%	1	2%
Level 8	10	6%	9	29%	1	2%
Total	171	100%	31	100%	49	100%

ICF GHK, EQF stakeholder survey

Most difficulties were faced at EQF level 5, which is at the limit between school/vocational education and training and higher education. There were associated difficulties at EQF Level 4 and 6. Twice as many respondents identified problems at level 5 compared to any other level; although even in the case of level 5, this related to only a fifth (21%) of total respondents.

Data collected in survey responses, desk research and interviews confirm the difficulties countries had in referencing to level 5. For instance, in Estonia there was an issue in the process when referencing the upper vocational VET programmes. These could be placed at either EQF level 4 or 5. Depending on the type of programmes, a part was referenced to EQF level 4 and another part was referenced to EQF level 5 – which includes new VET programmes defined in the New Act for Vocational Education. The issue here is that some qualifications with the same name at national level may correspond to different levels in the NQF and, as a result, to different learning outcomes.

Some stakeholders also noted that their national system did not have qualifications that perfectly corresponded to the EQF level 5 (e.g. Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal), which consequently made the referencing process more complex. In Poland, for instance, problems with referencing qualifications awarded in a formal and non-formal system to the EQF level 5 was considered one of the barriers to designing and referencing the NQF within the deadline.

In addition, data collected suggests that the NQF gave an opportunity to countries to make it explicit that certain VET and general qualifications have similar level of learning outcomes, even if their profile remains different (e.g. Austria and Germany). For instance, in the case of Germany, as interviewees mentioned, there was a vivid discussion in the referencing of the school leaving certificate (Abitur) which could possibly be referenced to either EQF level 4 or EQF level 5. In the end, the Abitur is not included in the DQR until decision is reached regarding which DQR level its learning outcomes fit.

The Recommendation is somewhat constrained here in being able to influence the outcome of referencing, but it is not clear that there would have been any credible alternative approach. Interviewees tended to characterise the issues in terms of aligning specific qualifications (albeit sometimes very important qualifications) rather than a general problem in any particular country. It was possible to work around these issues without undermining the eight-level framework and, **through the referencing process, there was an ability to challenge and be much more explicit about areas of potential misalignment.** The notion of framework development at national level being on-going or iterative, which appears to have gained wide acceptance as countries have progress through NQF/EQF development, helps in being able to sustain the credibility of the EQF referencing process even in the face of specific referencing challenges.

6.1.3 Comprehensiveness of the national frameworks and systems

The ambition of the EQF is to be a translation tool for all types and levels of qualifications across all education and training sub-systems. Desk research and interview data essentially indicate that **most countries consider they have developed (or are planning to develop) a comprehensive (overarching) qualifications framework**, which includes all officially recognised qualifications (i.e. all those qualifications – general and vocational education and training, including at higher level) recognised by the public authorities in the country). However, it is not always the case in practice and data collected shows evidence of difficulties in creating an overarching framework in practice:

- Some countries did not include some levels of formal education in their national framework. In France for instance, as mentioned in section 6.1.2 above, this is due to the fact that qualifications at these levels did not match the national purpose of the NQF (NQF reflecting professional qualifications only).
- Some countries did not include higher education qualifications in their NQF, either because they wait for the self-certification to the QF EHEA to be completed or, because this self-certification is completed, they do not see the added value of covering higher education in both the QF EHEA and the NQF (e.g. UK - England, Northern Ireland and Wales).
- Some countries (e.g. Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, The Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey) have – or will - develop their framework in two rounds:
 - The first round is for including qualifications awarded in the traditional formal education and training systems into their national qualifications framework.
 - The second round is for including further qualifications in their national qualifications frameworks, such as private sector provided qualifications or other non-state regulated education and training programmes or qualifications.

The various approaches outlined here are quite natural and understandable given the constraints around NQF development. There are various structural, cultural and political dimensions that determine what kind of qualifications are included in national qualifications frameworks and at what stage of the NQF development.

6.2 Relevance of the Recommendation as a policy instrument

This sub-chapter assesses the extent to which it was pertinent to use a Recommendation as the policy instrument to ensure commitment and mutual trust among participating countries. Findings about this question are two-fold:

- First, the Recommendation was the most appropriate instrument, given the boundaries of the subsidiarity principle.
- Second, some aspects of its design and content made it likely to effectively ensure commitment and mutual trust.

6.2.1 Instrumental aspect of the Recommendation

Given the fact that recommendations are non-binding acts, the Recommendation does not aim to replace or define national qualifications systems. Its potential effect on national systems largely depends on policy support for the goals of the Recommendation. In relation to qualifications, it is an important difference with the Professional Qualifications Directive, which may have a direct effect on national systems.

National stakeholders generally recognised a potential tension here between national drivers for qualification framework development – which are related to the national context and focus on national priorities - and the ambitions of the EQF recommendation – which addresses qualifications from a translation perspective. This can lead to a pragmatic approach to EQF activity – *i.e. working towards the objectives of increased comparability and transparency of national qualifications, but with a view to ensuring that national perspectives on the value and level of specific qualifications are not lost within the objective referencing process.*

6.2.2 Potential of the Recommendation to ensure commitment and mutual trust

Beyond the instrumental aspect of the Recommendation and its non-binding aspect, some of its elements were likely to ensure or limit commitment and may impact of levels of mutual trust.

Continuous follow-up of countries' progress towards the EQF target dates and announcement of some countries' achieving these targets has played an important role in ensuring commitment and mutual trust. The Recommendation is considered an appropriate way to encourage or 'pressure' other countries to take action towards implementation. This was confirmed by interviews with EQF advisory group members and EQF NCPs.

However, monitoring could also have the opposite effect on motivation to reach these deadlines. Although such a risk was not mentioned by interviewees among EQF advisory group members and NCPs, one may anticipate that the fact that other countries have only slowly progressed towards the target dates might release pressure on participating countries. More significantly, it could raise the perception (albeit wrongly in the view of most stakeholders) that failure to meet the original deadline somehow indicated a lack of commitment to the process at national level. In reality, it appears that this has been effectively addressed over time by a **growing and widely-held recognition that to develop national frameworks effectively is an ambitious task, more ambitious than anticipated, and that it may explain, if not justify, not meeting the deadlines set.**

There is an understanding that as long as progress can be seen, notably through the continuous follow-up and communication within the EQF implementation structure itself, this is more important than the deadline itself. This perhaps highlights the **importance of having a community of interest (and supporting infrastructure) to discuss and manage expectations within the context of the Recommendation instrument.** This aspect of the Recommendation was found to be particularly important according to EQF advisory group interviewees. The EQF experience shows very positively how, in the context of a Recommendation, there is a need to develop joint expectations between participating countries to achieve the difficult balance between ensuring momentum, but not putting the overall objectives of the initiative at risk by forcing countries to work too quickly.

Beyond the question of reaching the target dates, follow-up and monitoring of progress may also have a dual effect on mutual trust. Monitoring data provides evidence of how the EQF is implemented in practice at national level. Depending on the implementation examples provided, it may reinforce or limit trust in the framework's potential to reach its lifelong learning, mobility and employability objectives in practice.

The Recommendation is also used as reference document to support policy discussion. This is due to that fact that the text of the Recommendation and its annexes are written in a general way and at pitched at a high-level – as it targets a wide range of stakeholders. At the same time, the text of the Recommendation is practice-oriented, i.e. it addresses issues that are known and understood by policy makers, but also by learners and employers. As it is comprehensible to a wide and diverse range of stakeholders, the EQF provides a useful frame of reference for national discussions about qualification and for structuring national qualifications systems. Ultimately, the EQF Recommendation may be used as a tool for reforming education and training systems even its influence on policy developments remains soft. Stakeholders interviewed considered this aspect of the Recommendation particularly adapted to the needs of the EQF target groups.

The potential impact of the Recommendation is highly dependent on policy support at national level. The impact of the Recommendation could have been more limited in countries which already had a national qualifications framework in place in 2008 and in which the influence of the Recommendation was not needed to frame the national qualifications system. This has not proven to be entirely the case, as several of these countries have planned to reform their NQF following the presentation of the referencing report and to take on board comments received from other members of the EQF advisory group. However, only two countries have done so to date. The potential impact of the Recommendation is also limited in countries in which the establishment of a qualifications framework is not a policy priority – either because of changes in the political majority, or because of a priority shift to face the economic crisis. As a consequence, the policy support that is necessary for effective implementation of the EQF Recommendation is not ensured. The existence of this risk was recognised by EQF advisory group members and EQF NCPs interviewed.

The Council endorsement of the Recommendation gives it weights at national level, thus contributing to ensuring commitment at national level. A few stakeholders interviewed among EQF advisory group members reported that their countries' commitment (via the Council's endorsement) was a powerful argument to impulse and speed up action towards implementation of the EQF at national level.

6.3 The relevance of the EQF objectives in the context of wider EU goals

The relevance of the EQF objectives can be assessed by considering the extent to which they are aligned to the wider goals of the European strategy for education and training, such as ET2020 and flagship initiatives under EU2020. The rationale behind these initiatives is to stimulate the EU as a *'smart, sustainable and inclusive economy'*. Several action lines have been agreed to contribute to this objective, including action to improve mobility of learners and workers within the EU, including through the quality of education and training, and therefore contributing to the social aspect of EU policies, stimulating competitiveness through employability and encouraging innovation.

6.3.1 Relevance of the EQF objectives with regard to mobility objectives

6.3.1.1 Relevance to the mobility objective within ET2020

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ET2020 sets common goals for Member States regarding education and training policies up to 2020:

- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- promoting equality, social cohesion and active citizenship;
- and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

The EQF objectives are in line with the objectives of ET2020. Mobility in the context of the EQF refers to geographical mobility – from a country to another – as well as mobility within the education and training system. This includes both vertical mobility – from one education and training level to another – and horizontal mobility – from an education sub-system (e.g. VET) to another (e.g. higher education). **The EQF, in its design, aims to blur the barriers to these types of mobility, thus making lifelong learning a reality.** The effects of the EQF on mobility are hard to perceive for the time being – because implementation is still at an early stage. **One may anticipate that a fully implemented EQF could effectively facilitate mobility of learners across education and training sub-systems, levels and countries, in line with the ET2020 mobility objective.**

The EQF is explicitly referred and bound to the ET2020 mobility strategic objective. The establishment of the EQF was recommended as a translation device of qualifications systems and levels, so as *“to promote transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications”*, as stated in the Recommendation. If national qualification frameworks are referenced to the EQF, learners' mobility opportunities increase, both in terms of geography and across sectors.

At the same time, the EQF is based on the principle that all qualifications are expressed in learning outcomes and can be achieved by varied learning paths. The EQF fosters all types of learning, including that acquired outside the formal education and training systems. In this way, the EQF promotes the recognition of the full portfolio of learning outcomes, which present a holistic overview of what a learner is able to do.

Additionally, the learning outcomes perspective within the EQF promotes lifelong learning, given that learners are provided with an incentive to pursue further learning, even non-formal and informal, that can be recognised in the national qualifications framework.

As a consequence of the above, the EQF, among other factors, facilitates the achievement of the ET2020 mobility objective.

The second strategic objectives of ET2020 relates to quality in education and training, so as to make it more efficient and attractive. The EQF fully embraces the principle that ensuring quality assurance is likely to build mutual trust, which is necessary to make lifelong learning a reality in practice. Common quality assurance principles increase the transparency of qualifications and cultivate trust among stakeholders. Therefore, it provides the learner with an entrusted passport to progression and further learning. The EQF Recommendation explicitly stresses the need for Member States to promote and acquire quality assurance mechanisms for VET and higher education. Quality assurance in education and training is not only supported under the EQF, it is the main objective of the EQAVET Recommendation and also an important aspect of the Bologna Process, through the ESG. The coherence of the EQF quality assurance principle with these other quality assurance initiatives is addressed under Chapter 7.

Moreover, instruments developed under the OMC, such as EQF, which demand collaboration among Member States in order to succeed, increase collaboration and exchange of experience and best practices among EU Member States.

The EQF is also likely to contribute to the objective of ET2020 to promote equality, social cohesion and active citizenship – in particular as it aims to contribute to promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning policies and arrangements. The existence of an effective validation of non-formal and informal learning system can function as a motivation for low-skilled workers to develop further professionally and socially. Similarly, it may provide early school leavers with incentives to return to school, offering them an opportunity to have what they have done and learned in the meantime recognised and validated. This is important to note, in a context where providing early leavers with incentives to return to learning paths is identified as one of the directions Member States have to follow, so as to promote equity and social inclusion⁸⁰: The EQF, by fostering learning outcomes, also adds value to this goal: the flexibility of the route to a qualification can re-motivate early leavers of education to re-engage with training.

6.3.1.2 Relevance to the mobility objective within Youth on the Move

Some of the mobility aspects of the EQF, in particular the promotion of mobility across learning paths, including validation non-formal and informal learning, are essential to reaching the overall objectives of Youth on the Move. The possibility of recognition of nationally acquired tertiary degrees across Europe, the promotion of the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the subsequent mobility of the holder that EQF offers can be expected to firmly support this goal. In that respect, the EQF is likely to contribute indirectly at least to achieving the goals of Youth on the Move.

The EQF, at a minimum, provides the framework in which increased flexibility in learning pathways can take place. The experience of national developments aligned to the EQF suggests that there are significant barriers to achieving mobility across learning paths in practice – although the situation varies from country to country. However, it is clear that the process of mapping different types of qualification to a common set of levels can at least help identify systemic barriers to mobility and stimulate debate about whether they are justified. What is crucial is that the process of NQF development underpinned by the EQF is doing this on a relatively objective basis (a common overarching framework) and stimulating new consideration of how learners might progress within the system. The potential added value in future from the EQF to these debates at national level is to provide comparable examples of how other countries have increased flexibility in learning pathways.

6.3.1.3 Relevance to the mobility objective under the agenda for new skills and jobs

Although mobility is not a direct objective of this flagship initiative, the agenda for new skills and jobs aims to reach its goal of 75% of citizens employed by 2020 through, among other action lines, equipping people with the right skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow. The mobility of learners and employees that EQF can offer, along with the recognition of learning experiences and skills acquired from any path and education/training system, can contribute positively to the employability of current and future job-seekers and holders.

In this context, EQF supports the attainment of the EU2020 goal of 75% of citizens employed by 2020, although there are much more significant factors determining whether that goal is reached, not least the prevailing economic situation. Overall, the EQF mobility objective is in line with the objectives of EU2020 and ET2020, although given the timeframe for the EU2020 goal, any contribution of the EQF is likely to be marginal and difficult to isolate.

6.3.2 Relevance to competitiveness-related objectives (employability and innovation)

The relevance of the EQF to EU employability goals is related to the flagship initiatives Youth on the Move and the Agenda for new skills and jobs under EU2020. Youth on the Move stresses the importance of lifelong learning in the acquisition and development of skills, knowledge and competences of young people and adults in general, that will promote and secure their employability. In order to do so, flexibility in the acquisition and recognition of skills should be ensured. The EQF support this, as it promotes the acquisition and validation of skills through different learning pathways. In the same vein, the Communication on *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* underlines that “more flexible learning pathways are required” that allow for the

⁸⁰ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/107622.pdf, cited on 17/1/2013

inclusion of individuals at different life stages to move across various education systems and types of learning. **The EQF can serve this goal, given that its exact goal is to function as a platform that will facilitate the recognition of learning no matter the path taken, the duration of the learning or the background of the learner.**

Regarding the EQF's contribution to the agenda for new skills and jobs, EQF levels could function as a common language between the world of education and the labour-market. As reported in chapter 5, there is some scepticism among employer groups as to the relevance of the EQF to the labour market context; but this largely reflects that the EQF, even at the end of 2012, has not practically been tested in many contexts (i.e. labour market users have been practically unable to use the EQF because a large number of national frameworks are still being referenced or have only recently been referenced).

More specifically, the EQF can contribute to the following goals of the Agenda:

- Making labour markets function better, through further reform and equipping people with the right skills for employment: *“Further actions will allow people to develop the right mix of skills and help them find jobs”*.
- The provision of *“better incentives to take up learning opportunities”* is recognised as one of the key steps to achieve this goal. Overall, the Agenda places particular focus on upgrading people's skills, especially skills that are relevant to the demands of the labour market.

The use of the learning outcomes approach, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the common acceptance of EQF levels can prove to be a strong incentive for individuals to pursue learning. Moreover, the transparency of qualifications, strengthened by specific quality assurance processes provided by the EQF can increase the attractiveness of qualifications by employers.

The EQF is also likely to contribute to innovation, through promotion of the learning outcomes approach in general and of transversal competences in areas such as 'creativity' in particular. As far as this fourth ET2020 strategic objective is concerned, the inclusion of transversal competencies in curricula can be promoted from a learning outcomes perspective, given that learners' achievements in these competences are harder to assess in an input-based system. Moreover, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship competences can be cultivated through learning activities outside the typical classroom, especially in partnership with the business world. EQF provides for an efficient platform of their promotion, given its role as a “bridge” between all types of learning, across referenced national qualification frameworks. It therefore is aligned to and supports, in a very practical sense, wider moves to establish learning outcomes-based qualifications.

6.4 Conclusions on the relevance of the EQF Recommendation

Findings on the relevance of the EQF are summarised below:

- The relevance of the EQF design:
 - Most countries have developed (or are planning to develop) a comprehensive qualifications framework which includes all officially recognised qualifications from general, vocational education and training, including higher and adult education and promoting the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, although this has caused difficulties in practice and delayed the referencing process in some cases. Many of these difficulties are the result of the scale of ambition and the complexity of achieving alignment between what remain, in many countries, distinct education and training sub-systems.
 - There are examples of countries that have developed frameworks with more or less than eight levels owing to national considerations. This is a characteristic that is more common where the national framework precedes the EQF.
 - Overall, there is fairly wide consensus that, irrespective of the precise level-to-level fit between the EQF and national frameworks, the number of EQF levels is in line with the ambition to accommodate all European national (and regional) qualifications. In this sense, the number of EQF levels is considered relevant, workable and appropriate.
 - Even if issues have been identified in relation with learning outcomes descriptors linked to specific EQF levels in a limited number of cases, the learning outcome descriptors are considered appropriate and capable of covering all types of qualifications.
- **The relevance of the Recommendation as a policy instrument:** Given the objective of the EQF as a reference tool, the Recommendation was an appropriate approach to supporting transparency and comparability of qualifications at European level, while recognising the national basis of qualifications systems. There are no apparent alternative approaches that would have been likely to achieve the same level of commonality in approach and timing between countries.
- The existence of implementation **target dates** generated momentum and helped to reinforce commitment and mutual trust in the EQF's potential to reach its objectives. The fact that the Recommendation and its annexes could be used as **a common reference documents** for all stakeholders, thus ensuring common understanding of the EQF objectives and mutual trust among countries, also contributed, by its nature, to effectiveness of the EQF. Beyond the instrumental aspect of the Recommendation or the impetus it gives, policy support at national level is considered the main factor to ensure commitment, progress and thus mutual trust among participating countries.
- **The relevance of the EQF to wider European strategy for education and training:** Although it is only one of the factors influencing the objectives of the ET2020 and EU2020 flagship initiatives Youth on the Move and the Agenda for new skills and jobs, the EQF is relevant to these objectives and likely to contribute to reaching them.

Recommendations on this evaluation theme are presented in Chapter 9 Conclusions and Recommendations.

7 The coherence of the EQF with the implementation of other European mobility and transparency tools

This chapter presents findings in relation to the coherence of the EQF with other initiatives pursuing the similar objectives in terms of transparency, comparability and mobility of learners and workers. It considers the relationship between the EQF and following types of initiative:

- Tools that cut across education domains in a similar way to the EQF and which are highly-complementary to the EQF, namely Europass.
- Initiatives in the field of vocational education and training: The EQAVET recommendation to support quality assurance in VET; the ECVET recommendation to support credit accumulation and transfer based on learning outcomes.
- Initiatives in the field of higher education: Primarily the tools associated with the inter-governmental Bologna Process – notably the Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), which shares core objectives with the EQF, as well as competence-based tools to support credit accumulation and transfer (ECTS) and quality assurance in higher education (ESG QA HE). Initiatives in other policy domains share similar high-level policy ambitions in relation to mobility and lifelong learning and either could or do interact with the EQF as a result. One of the most important initiatives in this regard is the European Skills, Competences and Occupations taxonomy (ESCO) being led by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, which provides a labour-market oriented common description of skills, competences and qualifications. The other initiative that directly interacts with EQF is the Professional Qualifications Directive, which provides a direct lever to support job mobility between EU countries and which is based on the recognition of qualifications according to set criteria (including qualification level).

The first section below sets out what coherence and synergy looks like in practice across this diverse set of initiatives that are in some way related to the EQF. The chapter goes on to look at the evidence to date in terms of synergy at EU level before discussing what this has meant in terms of synergy at national level.

7.1 Areas of potential synergy

Coherence or synergy can be understood in relation to the following dimensions:

- Alignment of policy principles and objectives for different initiatives – i.e. whether they are consistent in important areas of overlap and whether they are linked in a way that is mutually-reinforcing and supports improved outcomes. The main areas in which the EQF overlaps with other initiatives relates to the use of learning outcomes (which is characteristic, for example, of instruments for credit accumulation and transfer), the QF-EHEA and the quality assurance of education and training.
- Degree of co-ordination in the management and implementation of different, complementary initiatives in order to ensure consistency and to develop synergies, noting that similar initiatives might be based on different policy instruments and at different levels of maturity – *i.e. some important areas of activity such as the Bologna process or the Professional Qualifications Directive pre-date the EQF Recommendation, while other initiatives were developed along a similar timescale to the EQF or, in the case of ESCO, subsequent to adoption of the EQF Recommendation.*
- Level of awareness and understanding among stakeholders of the links and alignment between different initiatives, reflecting activity to communicate the alignment and co-ordination between initiatives.

It is important to note that the degree of cooperation and synergy between the EQF and other instruments and tools in practice (i.e. approaches to co-ordination etc.) would be expected to vary by type of instruments and tools. The evidence collected for the purpose of this evaluation⁸¹ suggests that, unsurprisingly, there is closer co-ordination between the EQF and the group of instruments and

⁸¹ interviews with EQF advisory group members and EQF NCPs, as well as interviews with staff in charge of these other initiatives in the eight case study countries

tools in the education and training field – which are largely in the domain of DG Education and Culture - than between the EQF and the group of instruments and tools in other fields, such as the Professional Qualifications Directive in the internal market field - which are the responsibility of other DGs.

This has implications for ensuring high-level coherence – which is arguably easier to achieve within the work of a single DG than where there is a requirement for alignment in the approaches of different DGs. Even where there is synergy in policy intent between initiatives that are the responsibility of different DGs, the policy instruments being deployed might be so different that this has significant implications for the relative outcomes of different initiatives.

For example, a number of the initiatives within the education and training sphere are, like the EQF, based on a Recommendation (e.g. EQAVET; ECVET), while the recognition of professional qualifications is based on a Directive. As one stakeholder noted, a Directive is a *'more powerful instrument'* than a Recommendation and has a structure that is informed by specific legal considerations.

The principles and approaches developed in the context of the EQF have much more limited scope to influence than a Directive. Even where there are shared policy objectives (i.e. improved mobility), it may be that the approaches to achieving those objectives are not consistent. This was a widely-reported point among stakeholders discussing the interaction between the EQF and the Professional Qualifications Directive. Considering the differences in objectives, instruments used, implementation level and maturity of both initiatives, it is not realistic to expect a relatively-new tool such as the EQF, which is largely still in its development phase, to be able to impact on a Directive that has its roots in some cases to Directives going back decades and is therefore based on a quite different approach to assessing qualifications (being input- rather than outcomes-based).

Within the education and training field, the tools associated with the Bologna process are based on an inter-governmental process which precedes the EQF Recommendation, but its development is aimed to be in coherence between the EQF and the QF-EHEA. The Council of Europe has ensured this coherence within the activities of the EQF advisory group. Given that the EQF is a meta-framework aimed to be applicable to all forms of education and training; it therefore requires alignment and synergy with other tools and instruments in both the vocational and higher education fields.

7.2 Coherence at EU level

7.2.1 EU level synergy

7.2.1.1 The EQF and the QF-EHEA

Consistency between the EQF and the QF-EHEA initiative is monitored by the Council of Europe and the Commission. To ensure coherence and continuous dialogue between the EQF and the QF-EHEA, joint Peer Learning Activities have also been organised. Since the end of 2011 joint events with QF-EHEA and ENIC/NARIC stakeholders is also ensured (e.g. PLA on school leaving qualifications, PLA on EQF level 5, PLA on learning outcomes based credits), thus extending to higher education the organisational cooperation visible between EQF and policy developments in VET (EQAVET and ECVET). This trend at EU level was also perceived by some stakeholders interviewed at national level.

It was noted that while there is increasing alignment between the tools and initiatives, there were practical difficulties that should not be under-estimated – even relating to elements such as subtly different terminology used by different groups and the need to reinforce a common understanding of key concepts such as the EQF learning outcomes descriptors - if productive closer working was to take place in future.

As a framework, the QF-EHEA is the tool that shares the closest similarities to the EQF. This is both an area of strength and a potential challenge. While the governance and monitoring structures for the Bologna process are different to those underpinning the EQF⁸², the EQF and the QF-EHEA are seen

⁸² The governance structure of the Bologna process includes inter-ministerial meeting (approximately biennial) where representatives of all participating countries discuss achievement towards general objectives of the Process (action points) and specific objectives set in the previous inter-ministerial meeting. In terms of monitoring,

as operating in tandem by stakeholders involved EQF referencing and national stakeholders with a role promoting or advising the public on qualifications frameworks (e.g. qualifications authorities; guidance services; student unions etc.). **The compatibility between the level descriptors at EQF levels 6-8 and the Bologna cycles has been crucial to ensuring that EQF has the potential to be a genuine meta-framework encompassing all levels of learning.**

The QF-EHEA has a considerable impact on EQF implementation. The work undertaken under the Bologna process to align higher education qualifications has been to the benefit of the EQF in that it has, in effect, facilitated referencing of higher education qualifications, which have themselves been reformed to align with some of the principles of EQF through the Bologna process. Those countries that had already self-referenced their higher education qualifications to the QF-EHEA could use the work already done in that respect to prepare referencing of these qualifications – or qualifications levels – to the EQF.

In higher education, the EQF is receiving its first practical application in the context of student mobility, where the use of EQF levels facilitates the recognition process between countries. This is only yet evident in countries that have completed EQF referencing some time ago, but is seen as beneficial to both recognition authorities and students. However, this benefit is very much dependent on the implementation of the QF-EHEA and it is important to note that, from a practical perspective, users do not even necessarily distinguish between the two underpinning frameworks (QF-EHEA and EQF). This is a very practical application of synergy.

7.2.1.2 The EQF and the ECTS

Synergies between ECTS and the EQF are linked to the use and promotion of learning outcomes. ECTS is an instrument for credit transfer and accumulation in higher education, based on the principle that higher education programmes are designed in terms of components (or modules), using learning outcomes. Although the components of ECTS are quantified using credit points, which express typical student workload rather than learning outcomes as defined in the EQF, ECTS paved the way for the EQF and the use of its learning outcomes descriptors, at least conceptually.

In countries where the learning outcomes approach is more established (mainly in higher education and introduced by the ECTS), EQF implementation is more straightforward. There appears to be a mind-set in place in these countries associated with greater openness to the EQF model.

7.2.1.3 Thematic synergy in quality assurance: ESG QA HE and EQAVET

Regarding quality assurance, the majority of interviewees reported that the quality assurance principles of the EQF were overall in line and compatible with the quality assurance standards and guidelines for higher education. Interviewees did not report contradictions between these principles. As some pointed out, the absence of contradictions also comes from the fact that these principles remain quite general.

In terms of the usefulness of the ESG QA HE and of the EQAVET to support the implementation of the EQF, the research evidence shows the following:

- In higher education, the usefulness of the EQF quality assurance principles are more visible for the three highest levels of the EQF, since higher education stakeholders rely on principles and processes for quality assurance in higher education since 2005 (the ESG QA HE).
- In VET, the research did not reveal any example of the use of the EQAVET framework to ensure compliance with the quality assurance principles of the EQF or to meet the referencing criteria related to quality assurance. It shows that the use of the EQAVET framework in the context of the EQF implementation has been limited so far.

However, several interviewees pointed out a need for a better coordination at the EU level to ensure consistency in implementation. The conclusions of the Irish Presidency Conference on Quality Assurance and Qualifications frameworks⁸³ encouraged qualifications stakeholders to better

an analytical stocktaking/state of implementation report is prepared before each meeting. Stakeholders' organisations are also formally part of the Bologna Process.

⁸³ Held in Dublin on 12 and 13 March 2013 – conclusions available on <http://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/EU%20Conference/Presidencyconferenceconclusions.pdf>

cooperate on quality assurance issues, in particular in the context of EQF (annex III to the Recommendation), EQAVET and the ESG QA HE.

7.2.1.4 Conceptual synergies and organisational cooperation between EQF, EQAVET and ECVET

Conceptual synergies between EQF, EQAVET and ECVET are linked to the general objectives of these tools (facilitating transparency and mobility in education and training). Practical synergies and cooperation in implementation are linked to the fact that their implementation is based on general principles agreed in a reference document (a Recommendation) and their timing (2008-2009). In terms of governance, even if they present different governance structures (existence of an EQAVET Secretariat for EQAVET and involvement of an ECVET team for ECVET), their governance model is similar and the involvement of the European Commission is consistent among initiatives. This ensures that there is cooperation among the three initiatives.

Stakeholders at EU level reported that synergies in management between the initiatives have increased over the last two years, which suggests awareness at European level of the need for co-ordination. Positive examples of management co-ordination at EU level include:

- information sharing about developments in relevant initiatives;
- involvement of staff in charge of each initiative in activities of another initiatives (reported as a significant step to ensuring alignment);
- and consultation of other initiatives' stakeholders in decision-making.

The closest practical alignment is evident between the EQF, EQAVET and ECVET. This is partly a function of timing, alignment of policy instruments and the ease of co-ordination at European Commission level. The initiatives are following broadly similar development paths, providing practical opportunities for exchange of ideas through parallel networks. This is the case, for instance, in the context of joint events between EQF, ECVET and EQAVET.

Significantly, in the case of EQAVET, EQF and ECVET, a strategy to facilitate cooperation and synergies within these three initiatives was initiated, thus ensuring that synergies were maximised. It resulted, inter alia, in the organisation of joint events. **Going beyond ad hoc co-ordination and exchange to have an explicit strategy has enabled practical steps to widening the co-ordination effort (especially through joint events) to take place.** It appears to have led directly to the sense among wider stakeholders of increasing synergy between the initiatives. This suggests that it is not only important to have conceptual synergies underpinning these complementary initiatives, but that the connections are explicit to national stakeholders involved in each initiative.

Among stakeholders interviewed, EQF advisory group members and EQF NCPs were those who had the highest awareness and understanding about the ECVET and EQAVET. Among these interviewees, interaction between ECVET/EQAVET and the EQF, especially with regard to the quality dimension, was increasingly seen as important for the future success of all of the initiatives by stakeholders. These interviewees could generally see the rationale of having separate strands of work in these areas, but that over time there was a greater need to co-ordinate action. The most engaged stakeholders were generally aware of and supported early activity from the European Commission for better co-ordination. Stakeholders actively involved in EQAVET tended to report that the EQF has greater traction at national level and closer co-operation between the initiatives could, as a result, provide impetus to the promotion and visibility of the EQAVET agenda.

Regarding the organisation of joint events, two EQAVET/EQF/ECVET joint seminars have been held since 2008. This correlates with the start of activities of a reflection group on developing the strategy to facilitate cooperation and synergies within the work undertaken by EQAVET, EQF and ECVET:

- In 2011, the first seminar focused on quality assurance in VET qualifications and aimed at exploring the extent to which EU tools contributed to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes-based standards.
- In 2012, the seminar focused on learning outcomes-based credit systems and brought together EQF, ECVET, EQAVET and higher education experts. This makes an important connection between the VET and higher education spheres, which is particularly relevant to the ambitions of the EQF as a meta-framework.

The events provided an opportunity to bring together stakeholders of the three initiatives from participating countries. When asked about these events, stakeholders interviewed reported that these events were beneficial in terms of raising awareness about the other initiatives and how they were

implemented in other participating countries. Some interviewees were sceptical about the benefits of these meetings, especially where synergies between the initiatives exist at national level.

Overall, stakeholders perceived that synergies exist at EU level in terms of strategy (i.e. Commission services of the relevant initiatives ensured communication about relevant initiatives to EQF NCPs and EQF advisory group members and communications about the EQF to contact people of other relevant initiatives), but that this did not necessarily translate into a need for joint awareness raising events. According to these interviewees, synergies in implementation should take place at national level and be the responsibilities of participating countries.

7.2.1.5 The EQF and Europass

Regarding Europass, conceptual synergies exist, as both Europass and the EQF aim to increase the visibility of qualifications. In Ireland and Latvia, the strong synergy between EQF development and Europass has its origin in the fact that responsibility these activities partly resides in the same structure.

The implementation of the EQF is dependent on implementation of the Europass. This is translated into the operational objectives of the EQF in the EQF Recommendation, which calls for Member States to adopt the required measures to ensure that the EQF level figures on qualifications certificates and also Europass documents as of 2012 (see 2.1 and 4.1.1). This type of synergy in implementation is important in the sense that cross-references to other initiatives avoids confusion linked to the existence of different initiatives and makes it visible to target groups that they form a coherent approach. However, due to the delays in the EQF implementation, the objective of ensuring that documents issued by national authorities refer to the EQF, through the national qualification system by 2012 had been considered less of a priority among participating countries.

Some countries have met this deadline and include a reference to EQF levels in their national documents and in national qualifications databases:

- Five countries indicate EQF levels in Europass Certificates Supplement or Diplomas Supplements (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France and Ireland).
- Two of them indicate EQF levels in certificates or diplomas (Czech Republic, France). – Lithuania will also indicate EQF levels on vocational qualifications certificates as of January 2013.

Moreover, four countries indicated EQF levels in national qualifications databases by the end of 2012 (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, and United Kingdom).

Interviewees reported that the synergies between EQF and Europass were limited so far, considering the low level of implementation of the second EQF milestone. However, they saw a potential for the EQF to be more visible through its reference in Europass certificates and diploma supplement. This finding is in line with the conclusions of the second evaluation of Europass⁸⁴.

7.2.1.6 The EQF and the key competences framework

As introduced in section 2.3.2, the key competences framework supports lifelong learning reform through a competence-based approach, in line with the learning outcomes approach promoted in the context of the EQF.

It is reasonable to expect that through the development and promotion of the EQF, the transversal competences in the 2006 Framework should be promoted too, and that these competences would be embedded in the EQF and NQFs.

However, by nature, the EQF does not refer to any specific competences, but is able to cover all different types of competences - including key competences - at different levels⁸⁵. These key competences are not explicitly part of the EQF, but implicitly embedded in it.

Key competences were explicitly referred to and covered in two referencing reports (Malta and Portugal), with, in the case of Malta, a clear reference to the Key Competences Framework.

Furthermore, the research only showed a few examples of cooperation or synergy between the EQF and the Key Competences Framework (e.g. a PLA on key competences co-organised for the key

⁸⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/evalreports/training/2013/europass_en.pdf

⁸⁵ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/brochexp_en.pdf

competences cluster and the learning outcomes cluster in 2009). When asked about synergies between the EQF and other European level initiatives, none of the interviewees referred to the 2006 key competences framework.

7.2.1.7 *The EQF and the ESCO*

DG EAC and DG EMPL are working together to develop a multilingual classification of European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations (ESCO). ESCO aims to organise concepts that are relevant in the European labour market and in the education/training sector. As such, it is relevant to the work around qualifications carried out in the context of the EQF.

In ESCO, qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes, expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. In the ESCO working group, both the education and the labour market sectors are represented, as in the EQF advisory group⁸⁶. The key difference is that ESCO aims to be more explicitly employability and labour market-oriented than the EQF and thus highlight the aspects of learning outcome descriptors that matter the most for employers. ESCO developed standardised terminology of skills to be able to find matches between skills needed in occupations and skills to be acquired with the acquisition of qualifications. This terminology could benefit the EQF when it comes to describing specific qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. While the EQF learning outcomes descriptors remain general – they aim to accommodate a variety of education and training situations – the ESCO taxonomy goes into greater details in the definition of occupations and learning outcomes specific to this occupation. As such, ESCO proposes a more concrete – and closer to practice - approach to the use of learning outcomes descriptors.

It is too early to expect tangible progress towards achieving these benefits; what is important is that there is sufficient co-ordination to ensure that the benefits may be realised further down the line. The EQF advisory group has been kept informed of technical developments related to ESCO⁸⁷. However, to ensure consistency of the ESCO terminology with the EQF, it is important to ensure that the EQF advisory group follows-up on ESCO developments and systematically checks compatibility of this terminology with the EQF. This follow-up would ensure consistency among initiatives and identify potential inconsistencies (e.g. in the use of terminology), so that they can be flagged to ESCO and addressed, if relevant with the support of the EQF advisory group. Feedback from the EQF advisory group on the ESCO terminology would thus contribute to ensure mutual trust and facilitate further synergies between both initiatives.

7.2.1.8 *The EQF and the Professional Qualifications Directive*

Regarding the Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD), the EQF Recommendation clearly sets the scene regarding the interaction between both initiatives. The EQF Recommendation makes particular reference that the EQF levels on qualifications should not affect access to the labour market where professional qualifications have been recognised in accordance with the 2005 PQD. The Directive arguably has greater potential for lack of synergy with the EQF than any of the other related initiatives. The EQF is in line with most other initiatives (and certainly those in the education and training sphere), in that it is competence-based, whereas the professional qualifications directive provides for the assessment of qualifications based on input measures (length of study; institution of study).

In the framework of the evaluation of the PQD, and in preparation of the revision of the Directive, the Commission contracted a study evaluating the PQD against EU educational reforms, including the EQF⁸⁸. According to this study, the PQD would benefit from using the learning outcomes approach instead of the input-based approach of the 2005 Directive, provided that the descriptions in terms of learning outcomes are detailed enough. There were a number of debates covered in the study that underpin the potential for lack of synergy between the Directive and the EQF:

- Both initiatives are based on a system of levels. One of the Commission's concerns was that, as the EQF has a higher number of levels than the Directive (eight versus five), in the context of the Directive it might constrain free movement by giving more scope for

⁸⁶ Two EQF AG members – country representatives and the representative of PES in the AG participate - in the Board of ESCO – since 2009.

⁸⁷ In particular, two members of the EQF AG are members of the ESCO Board, which governs the ESCO development.

⁸⁸ Study evaluating the Professional Qualifications Directive against recent educational reforms in EU Member States, 2011: http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/docs/policy_developments/final_report_en.pdf

competent authorities to refuse recognition based on level (therein reducing mobility). In reality, the study showed that the differences in the systems of level are not necessarily significant. The EQF arguably provides greater potential for free movement in that there is no explicit link between EQF level and institution of study. Most importantly, recognition decisions are not based on level in isolation, and the assessment of substantial differences in training content is a much more significant issue inhibiting mobility.

- The EQF is not necessarily well-established enough in order to underpin a Directive. This is a relatively un-contentious point. The study showed that awareness of EQF levels was relatively low in 2011 among recognition authorities, except where EQF referencing was complete. More significantly, there was resistance in some countries to using outcomes-based approaches to assessing qualifications, reflecting the work still to be done to establish the learning outcomes approach.
- There was a concern that incorporating the EQF within the Directive would provide it with a legal status going beyond the intention of the Recommendation. The counter concern among some education and training professionals was that without reference to the EQF, the Directive might become a barrier to further EQF implementation, because of its legal status and the distinct system of levels it includes. In reality, therefore, the debate was less about referencing the EQF in the Directive, but *how* the EQF could be referred to in the Directive to promote synergy between different policy fields that share the same policy objective.

The Commission proposed further synergies with the EQF in the revision of the PQD. This proposal foresees the creation of 'Common Training Principles' in replacement of the 'common platforms' introduced in the 2005 PQD (and not implemented yet). These aim to allow automatic recognition for professionals if they have a qualification that is developed based on the common training framework. The Commission proposal foresees that the common training frameworks are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences and shall refer to levels of the EQF Recommendation (Annex II).⁸⁹

7.2.2 Awareness and understand of synergies among stakeholders

The most visible examples of synergies at EU level for national level stakeholders were related to actions aiming to raise awareness among EQF stakeholders about other initiatives. This translates mainly into information about other initiatives provided to EQF stakeholders and the organisation of joint events.

EQF NCPs and EQF advisory group members, as well of contact points for other initiatives at national level (interviewed in the context of the case studies), stressed the importance of keeping up to date with initiatives related to the EQF. They understood that these initiatives share the same general objectives and that it is important to ensure coherence in implementation. They reported, for instance, on the importance of being informed about developments at EU level regarding EQAVET, ECVET, the Bologna Process in general and quality assurance in higher education in particular during the EQF advisory group and NCP meetings. Some interviewees reported they would need more information about ESCO and the Professional Qualifications Directive. When asked about synergies with ESCO and the Professional Qualifications Directive, a few interviewees felt that the EQF should focus on achieving its own objectives as the main priority and at the same time keep stakeholders informed about aspects of these initiatives that are relevant to the EQF. The potential policy gap between the EQF and the Directive – in terms of the objectives, implementation strategy and maturity - was a common concern voiced by stakeholders in countries that are relatively advanced in their use of learning outcomes.

A few stakeholders reported that the lack of cooperation between initiatives at national level resulted from the fact that cooperation at EU level happened quite late in the development and implementation of these initiatives, but this view was not shared by the majority of stakeholders, who reported that while the EU could support synergies, synergies at national level were essentially the responsibility of national stakeholders.

In terms of EU support to synergies at national level, some interviewees suggested the development of communication and information tools targeting national stakeholders and clearly stating how these

⁸⁹ En this report was prepared, this text was under discussion in the Council and in the European Parliament as part of the Ordinary legislative procedure.

initiatives relate to each other. A few interviewees suggested, for instance, a joint portal for EQF, EQAVET and ECVET.

7.3 Synergies at national level

In higher education, countries have taken different approaches to the link between referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF EHEA. Some countries that referenced recently decided to run present a single report for the referencing to the EQF and the self-certification to the QF-EHEA (e.g. Slovenia). Other countries (e.g. England and Northern Ireland), however, considered that there was no need for referencing higher education qualifications to the EQF, as long as these were self-certified to the QF-EHEA.

At national level, the timeliness of the EQF, EQAVET and the ECVET Recommendations and the implementation target were perceived differently among countries. Only a few countries saw the timeliness of these initiatives as an opportunity to ensure synergies in implementation at national level. What was considered timely for some countries represented a barrier to implementation in other countries.

Desk research at national level did not reveal explicit examples of synergies among these initiatives in their implementation in participating countries. Some interviewees reported that national authorities had decided to focus on the implementation of one initiative at a time, depending on their national priorities. This translates in some cases to delays in the implementation of some initiatives. Those countries which had set up common structures for implementing the European tools (such as the UK) reported that the approach was extremely beneficial in ensuring that dissemination could be co-ordinated and to benefit from efficiencies stemming from the direct complementarity between the initiatives.

Quality assurance in education and training is considered a priority in many countries. In that respect, the implementation of the ESG, EQAVET and the quality assurance aspects of the EQF were given particular attention.

In most countries, the quality assurance approach in education was triggered by the higher education sector and the 1998 and 2006 Recommendations on quality in higher education. Implementation of further initiatives linked to quality assurance were conducted in line with the approach adopted for higher education, thus contributing to ensuring coherence between quality assurance in higher education and in other areas of education and training under the EQF.

In general, stakeholders mention the lack of dialogue between VET and higher education at national level as the main barrier to consistent implementation of the quality assurance principles at national level. Interviewees also reported an organic and instrumental barrier: education and training and the quality assurance measures are the responsibility of different national authorities and regulated by different acts. This hinders the process of developing a common system of quality assurance.

Case studies provided good examples of synergies among initiatives at national level. In France, Ireland and Latvia, EQF stakeholders perceived they were well informed, had a good understanding and could be involved in other relevant initiatives. When asked about the drivers for these synergies, interviewees stressed the importance of such cooperation at organisational level. There are more synergies in countries where the same organisation is in charge of more than one of these initiatives (e.g. Latvia, Ireland since the end of 2012), or when stakeholders of one initiative are formally consulted when it comes to implementing the EQF (e.g. France). Personal and informal contacts among national contact points of the relevant initiatives were also stressed as drivers for synergies. This translates into a better dissemination of information about EU initiatives among their contact point at national level.

While the added value of joint events at EU level was considered limited, EQF stakeholders interviewed reported that such joint events should rather be organised at national level. Such events would contribute to raise awareness and understanding among national stakeholders about the different initiatives, what their objectives are, how they interlink and how they contribute to the same general objectives. Some interviewees suggested that the organisation of joint events at national level could be a requirement for EQF NCP grants. In the same vein, some stakeholders suggested that the EU should encourage the design of joint websites at national level to present and promote some of the initiatives. It could be the case for instance for ECVET, EQAVET and EQF.

7.4 Conclusions on the coherence of the EQF with the implementation of other European mobility and transparency tools

Findings on coherence of the EQF with the implementation of other European mobility and transparency tools are summarised below:

- Overall, coherence of the initiatives has been ensured at European level between the EQF and **EQAVET** and **ECVET**, including through cooperating in management and organisation at European level. At national level, cooperation depends substantially on structural factors. It tends to be higher in countries where staff in charge of these initiatives are part of the same organisation or have a history of working together. Where co-ordination between the implementation of different initiatives has been actively pursued at national level, this delivers efficiencies for national agencies and helps to ensure consistency in approach.
- **Implementation of the EQF (second milestone) is dependent on implementation of the Europass** – especially given the objective to have EQF levels reflected in Europass certificates – but synergies have been limited so far. This is partly due to delays in meeting the second EQF deadline. However, the evaluation also found little evidence of cooperation between EQF and Europass initiatives at national level (except where these initiatives were the responsibility of the same organisations).
- Due to the pre-existence of relevant **higher education** initiatives (the qualifications framework for higher education; quality assurance principles in higher education; promotion of the use of learning outcomes through ECTS), ensuring coherence with these initiatives and tools has been key to the development and implementation of the EQF. The risk of divergence has been avoided thanks to co-operation among these initiatives and tools since the start of the EQF. This cooperation has further developed in recent years, with an increasing involvement of higher education and Bologna process stakeholders in the EQF and mechanisms in place to ensure coherence between the EQF and the QF-EHEA. This cooperation should be continued.
- Cooperation has also been developed beyond the education and training area, in particular with the framework of the **ESCO** initiative. Strong links have been developed in the conceptual phase of ESCO. There is a potential for increased synergy between the EQF and ESCO once the latter reaches a more mature stage of development. To facilitate this, a regular follow-up of ESCO activities by the EQF advisory group should be maintained. This is made possible by the participation of EQF advisory group members in the ESCO board and by regular reporting in EQF advisory group meetings about ESCO development.
- Regarding the **Professional Qualifications Directive**, although synergies are not realistic to expect, coherence and consistency between the EQF and the Directive should be ensured. The Commission has investigated room for closer cooperation between the PQD and the EQF.

Recommendations on this evaluation theme are presented in Chapter 9 Conclusions and Recommendations.

8 The impact and sustainability of the EQF

This chapter presents findings in relation to the impact of the EQF Recommendation (i.e. the extent to which the initiative is contributing to wider lifelong learning objectives) and its sustainability (i.e. the level of continuing commitment to the EQF beyond the presentation of referencing reports to ensure that longer-term impact is achieved).

The chapter covers four issues in relation to the following sections:

- The impact of the EQF on national education and training policies;
- The impact of the EQF on European co-operation;
- The impact of the EQF on co-operation with third countries;
- The sustainability of the EQF.

8.1 Policy impact of the EQF at national level

In most countries, a NQF has been or is being developed under the influence of the EQF Recommendation. It is thus often the case that countries wanting to implement the EQF have had to consider whether to first develop a NQF or to directly reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF. Although direct referencing was an option proposed in the Recommendation, almost all countries⁹⁰ have chosen to design a NQF. In most cases, the main reason given for choosing a NQF was to facilitate the referencing process (see sub-section 4.1.1.3).

Beyond the technicalities of the referencing, the main motivation to design a NQF was for countries to improve lifelong learning or increase transparency and comparability of qualifications. This was confirmed in interviews with EQF advisory group members. The EQF and its objectives are in line with the lifelong learning strategies at European level and related policies at national level. **In that respect, the EQF contributed to implementation of some aspects of the national lifelong learning strategies.**

The EQF is not the sole driver for the development of national frameworks, but it is arguably a significant catalyst for the timing of development in many countries and certainly for the shape of development (in terms of the definition and structure of levels used).

The EQF, through the development of the NQF, is also likely to influence the development of national education and training policy. The potential impact on national education policies depends on the stage of implementation reached in the country:

- In countries where a NQF was in place before the Recommendation, the impact of the EQF on national qualifications system is likely to be limited, as the qualifications culture was already in place. The highest likely impact of the EQF in these countries will be in terms of cross-country mobility, which depends on other countries' referencing their NQFs to the EQF;
- In countries where the EQF implementation has just started and in countries that have managed to design their NQF and reference by the end of 2012, the likely impact of the EQF – through the NQF - on education and training systems is likely to be higher in the long run, but this impact is not yet visible.

This was confirmed by interviewees, who mentioned that it was still too early to measure the expected impacts of the NQF at national level and the EQF at European level as it was recently implemented and still currently being implemented in some countries.

Nevertheless, the great majority of stakeholders from countries that have adopted a NQF have noticed positive changes in the national context due to the development of the NQF. Namely that the NQF:

- made the national qualification systems easier to understand and navigate. It improved transparency at the national level as well as permeability / transferability between different qualifications systems (e.g. between VET and HE);
- increased the attractiveness and value of vocational qualifications in society, improving the image of VET and fostering the valuing of vocational knowledge, skills and

⁹⁰ Italy is the only country that chose to reference its qualifications levels to the EQF and then to develop a national qualifications framework

competences at the same level as academic knowledge and credentials (note that this was generally articulated as a conceptual benefit, there is little recent national evidence of qualification attractiveness or value among, for example, potential learners);

- increased the importance for the validation of informal and non-formal learning;
- increased the attention to quality assurance in qualifications;
- reinforced the use of learning outcomes for curricula developments;
- strengthened cooperation between various stakeholders in the field of education (traditionally quite separated) and the labour market.

Stakeholders were reluctant to discuss expected impacts so early after the adoption of that NQF and the referencing in some countries. Case studies offered illustrations of expected impacts of the EQF at national level. In Germany, the EQF has triggered a greater use of learning outcomes to describe qualifications, which was not the case traditionally. This was also perceived in Latvia.

In Denmark, the most significant expected impact of the EQF at national level is related to the use of learning outcomes in the country and curriculum development. The case study highlights, as an example of this impact, changes in the way curriculum is designed and described in the country. Although the potential impact of this effect is considered to be substantial, some interviewees were reserved about its likelihood. This potential impact is worth monitoring, as it indicates the extent to which the intended impacts of the EQF translate into practice.

In Germany, the EQF has facilitated dialogue among education and training sub-systems that were traditionally separated: general, vocational and higher education. This is an indication of an important potential impact of the EQF in the future, as the lack of dialogue among education and training sub-systems is an issue in most countries.

Stakeholders were generally confident that the EQF had a significant *potential* impact on national education systems and on education and training in Europe in general. **Overall, there are examples of influence of the EQF on national education and training policies at national level, but the general impact of the EQF at that level has been rather limited so far, with some examples of effects in the use of learning outcomes though. The impacts of the EQF are expected to be visible in the long run.**

8.2 The EQF impact on European cooperation in education and training

The OMC relies on national cooperation. Its impact on education and training policies depends on countries' willingness to work together and progress towards common goals. The EQF offers an interesting example of how European cooperation can contribute to reaching these goals. It is useful to assess cooperation in the context of the EQF beyond the achievement of its objectives and see success factors and barriers to successful cooperation in this context.

Some specific aspects of the EQF can be considered success factors in European cooperation in education and training. First, its structure and format allowed effective peer learning, going beyond awareness raising about other qualifications systems, but requiring a real understanding of the national context and issues. The EQF has contributed to cooperation in education and training in the 33 countries participating in EQF through the organisation of meetings and events which gave the opportunity to stakeholders involved in the same issues in different countries to meet, exchange with and learn from their peers.

Although the issues encountered in the implementation of the Recommendation highly depend on the national context, interviewees among EQF advisory members and NCPs showed they often faced the same difficulties in implementation (e.g. stakeholder engagement). Interacting with people with the same interests and similar issues in the context of the EQF advisory group and the EQF NCP network were perceived as good examples of cooperation in the context of the EQF.

The involvement of international experts in the referencing process, often other members of the EQF advisory group, is another important aspect of this cooperation. It reinforces the cooperation, as it goes beyond awareness and understanding about another countries' system, but actually implies an in-depth understanding of the system and working together towards referencing it to the EQF. The important point about the role of the international experts is that it was generally perceived as adding significant value to the national referencing process. Without the EQF referencing criteria, it is possible that some countries would not have used international experts. It has over time become established as an integral part of the referencing process – not just on paper, but in practice as well.

This is reportedly because there are benefits both to the countries undertaking referencing and the international experts themselves (it improves their understanding of qualifications systems in other countries). The international experts also play a useful role for NCPs and other stakeholders directly involved in referencing as being ‘critical friends’ whose independent perspectives can add useful weight to internal policy discussions about the national education and training system. These exchanges are a very practical example of European co-operation in action.

The monitoring and reporting activities carried out in preparation of EQF advisory group meetings have also contributed to raising awareness about qualifications systems in other countries. Presentation of qualifications systems and of referencing reports provide participating countries with an in-depth view on the qualifications system in a given country, as well as the challenges encountered and issues faced in the design of a qualifications framework and in the referencing process. It is important to emphasise that, from a stakeholder perspective, this is not simply about the referencing reports themselves, but that the EQF governance structure, with its possibility of peer exchange and country-led co-operation, provides a much richer engagement on national qualification systems than most active participants have previously had the opportunity to experience. **There is an important undercurrent of improved understanding of other countries’ systems that is almost inherent in the EQF model and which is an important precondition for growing and maintain mutual trust.** Some of this is informal and ad hoc in nature, and there remains a question about how this positive country-to-country engagement can be harnessed to cement the EQF in future.

Specifically, peer learning activities gave the opportunity to participants to work together on more practical issues linked to the EQF, *e.g. higher qualifications or a specific EQF level or working with a specific aspect of the EQF, such as validation of prior learning or leaning outcomes*. These opportunities were considered beneficial to participants. Interviewees who participated in peer learning activities suggested that this format of meetings (smaller number of participants, focus on a specific issue) facilitated cooperation among participants.

The format of the NCP meetings compared to the EQF advisory group contributed to informal cooperation between participants beyond the context of the meetings. This aspect of cooperation was considered particularly important by participants, who reported, for instance, that some EU funded projects (EQF pilot projects or others) found their origin in informal discussion in parallel to EQF peer learning activities. Interviewees stressed **the importance of personal contacts rather than institutional contacts**. Informal contacts in the context of the EQF advisory group meetings, NCP meetings and PLAs contribute to developing and reinforcing these contacts, thus contributing to co-operation.

However, the impact of the EQF cooperation has been limited to participants in the networks and their close collaborators. Interviewees reported sharing information from the EQF advisory group and NCP meetings with their colleagues at national level, but also with wider stakeholders (in context of the NCP activities). This was more difficult to perceive from these wider stakeholders themselves when interviewed as part of the case studies. Even those stakeholders that knew about the EQF and had been involved in the referencing process at a point in time generally reported that they were not up to date with the latest development of the EQF. This highlights a risk that the influence of the EQF in cooperation in education and training is limited to a closed network of members of the EQF advisory group, NCPs and their organisations.

Another form of cooperation also emerged from the EQF. Countries develop smaller scale cooperation at regional level around the topic of qualifications. Interviewees in Nordic countries reported close cooperation regarding qualifications. It implied, in practice, for instance, working together to avoid contradictions between referencing within the Nordic network and ensuring consistency among national qualifications frameworks.

Beyond the formal framework of the EQF advisory group, a majority of countries reported that they cooperate with their neighbours on the EQF implementation. The geographical proximity and similarities among those countries in terms of size, education system and culture enhances this cooperation. Cooperation in this context most typically takes the form of exchange of best practice, understanding how a country has solved some particular issues and of case study visits. For instance, Austria is part of a (informal) network with Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland in which a regular exchange of experiences is organized. Cyprus closely collaborates with Greece and Malta. The Irish and UK awarding bodies and qualifications authorities have undertaken an exercise to align the qualifications frameworks in the UK and Ireland (including producing joint materials for the public at large).

There are also examples of cooperation at regional level. In the Belgium case, there has been a strong cooperation between the Dutch, French and German speaking communities in order to ensure compatibility between the frameworks. The Flemish QF is being used as a meta-tool to link the three qualifications frameworks.

8.3 The impact of the EQF in cooperation with third countries

Cooperation taking place with countries outside of the EU is less systematic than cooperation among participating countries. Here again, cooperation takes place at individual level rather than institutional level.

The EQF has had an influence on the development of qualifications frameworks beyond Europe. However, there has not been much cooperation between the EQF and third countries. Only interviews in around a third of EQF countries reported cooperation with countries non-EQF countries. Most cooperation happens with Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean region, in most cases with support from the Tempus Programme. For instance, Estonia presented its EQF experience to stakeholders in Kosovo, Serbia, Moldova.

Cooperation depends on geographical proximity, language and similarities in the education and training system. Croatia has been involved in activities with Eastern European countries, the Western Balkans and some Central Asian countries (mainly joint organisation of or contribution to qualifications-related events). France mentioned cooperation with some French-speaking Mediterranean countries in the establishment of its qualifications framework. There are also examples of regional qualifications framework with the purpose of exchanging experience and promoting good practice among them. There is an example, for instance, in South East Europe formed by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Macedonia, Greece, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey.

Croatia chaired the first meeting of the Cluster of Knowledge on Development of National Qualifications Frameworks on October 2012 where other countries participating were Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, and Serbia. In addition, Croatia was also present in the ETF council initiative conference in Azerbaijan. Also, Slovenia regularly cooperates in the field of VET with countries such as Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina also in the field of qualifications frameworks. Finally, Romania is developing initiatives with Lebanon and Egypt. This cooperation is supported by the ETF, e.g. with its Qualifications Platform⁹¹.

Some countries mentioned bilateral cooperation with Russian, Indian and Chinese stakeholders, (e.g. Finland) as well as with USA and Canada (e.g. Malta), but in most cases these contacts are informal and have not yet led to cooperation in practice.

International stakeholders reported that many countries were setting up national qualifications frameworks and that many were influenced by the EQF. Examples given included developments in the United Arab Emirates. There has been continuous discussion and activities to assess the opportunity to have the revised Australian NQF aligned with the EQF, in the context of the EU-Australia policy dialogue. The work carried out in the context of the EQF is reportedly taken into account for education and training policy developments in India, Canada and USA. Moreover, the EQF has influenced other transnational frameworks, such as the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF), the Caribbean Qualifications Framework (CVQF), the Southern Pacific Register, and the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Stakeholders interviewed also reported an increasing interest in the EQF developments from countries in Latin America, therefore they see a potential for impact of the EQF in Latin America.⁹²

⁹¹ http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Qualification_Frameworks

⁹² On the Southern African and Caribbean developments, also see ETF (2011), Transnational Qualifications Frameworks on [http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/0/720E67F5F1CC3E1DC125791A0038E688/\\$file/Transnational%20qualifications%20frameworks.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/0/720E67F5F1CC3E1DC125791A0038E688/$file/Transnational%20qualifications%20frameworks.pdf)

8.4 The sustainability of the EQF

The EQF Recommendation envisaged a series of actions to be undertaken up to 2012. Looking to the future, the sustainability of the EQF depends on a number of key factors:

- Whether the goals of the EQF as set out in the Recommendation have been achieved to date. Furthermore, whether there is a need for a further programme of work at European level to ensure that the goals of the EQF are achieved in future *and* sustained in the long-term (i.e. to ensure that benefits from the EQF are not transient in nature).
- What the future programme of work should look like and how it relates to the existing governance arrangements for the EQF.

8.4.1 The need for an on-going programme of action

Given that work is continuing on the referencing process and there is considerable work to ensure that EQF levels are included on qualification documents, it is difficult to see how momentum can be maintained without having continued European-level support to the process.

One of the areas of clear added value to date has been the way in which the EQF instrument itself and its governance arrangements have facilitated a commonality of approach (e.g. referencing principles). This is likely to be at risk in future without the continued work of the EQF advisory group and the central dissemination of EQF results and guidance (via the portal).

By the end of 2012, the EQF was not sufficiently developed in order to achieve or measurably contribute to its long-term goals. Even if the timescales for EQF referencing and for the inclusion of EQF levels on qualification documents had been met, it is likely that a measurable impact on mobility, lifelong learning and social inclusion would not be apparent within the timeframe of this evaluation.

There is an assumption that, over time, the value and use of the EQF as a translation tool will grow as awareness increases and its practical benefits become apparent (*i.e. the EQF was always more than a one-off exercise*). This view has been reinforced by the experience of referencing to date – which emphasises it as much more of an on-going process, even for countries that were relatively early to reference.

There is a fear voiced by stakeholders in some of these countries that, after referencing is complete, the EQF risks dropping off the radar at national level. Probing stakeholder views of why this happens, it is clear that it is not an inevitable situation. For those countries that were early to reference, it is primarily a problem of waiting for the critical mass of other countries to have completed referencing so that the robustness and credibility of the framework can be more actively tested and so that users can benefit from the Framework. A continued programme of action is not therefore simply about ensuring all countries complete initial referencing.

The long-term sustainability of the EQF therefore depends on continued action to both:

- ensure its establishment (the completion of initial referencing in all countries; much wider inclusion of EQF level on qualifications documents and certificates),
- as well as on-going action to maintain its credibility (updates to initial referencing; activity to tackle identified issues after the first referencing stage).

8.4.2 The future programme of support at European level

The existing evidence base suggests a number of points about the future programme of support required to ensure that the EQF is an established framework that is widely-used and widely-trusted:

- There is a critical need for an on-going monitoring and learning function. There appears to be wide-spread acceptance (indeed demand) for an explicit programme that ensures countries report updates and progress post-referencing. This helps to develop confidence in the Framework and provides a forum for addressing challenges as they emerge.
- The current governance arrangements have been crucial to progress to date and therefore logically provide the main forum for ensuring continued commitment. It is also possible to consider that the EQF advisory group should have a role in more recent developments that could prove to be beneficial to the future comparability and translation of national education and training systems (notably ESCO). There is related work, such as improving understanding of the uses of learning outcomes and quality assurance

approaches within countries, which could be monitored by this group in the context of the EQF.

- Although the original EQF target dates played a role in gaining initial momentum, in the next phase it is arguably more important to ensure that countries can work independently and jointly to refine initial referencing at their own speed (within reason and notwithstanding the need to continue to meet to original commitments on referencing and the inclusion of EQF levels on qualification documents). In this way, the EQF advisory group has scope to become a broader good practice network.
- There are a set of issues that, largely because of the maturity of the EQF, have not been systematically addressed so far, but which are crucial to realising the potential benefits of the EQF (e.g. the referencing of sector qualifications). The EQF pilot project model provided a useful forum for transnational working to tackle some of these questions – even though the projects were in some cases too early in the EQF development for their learning to be widely incorporated. It is likely that this kind of activity, alongside PLAs, can be increasingly relevant in the context of *testing and promoting practical benefits of the EQF* in the context of sectors, subjects and vocational areas.

8.5 Conclusions on the impact and sustainability of the EQF

Findings on the impact of the EQF are summarised below:

- **Policy impact of the EQF:** The overall impact of the EQF on education and training policies has been limited so far, although there are examples of countries in which the EQF has been an opportunity to launch wider reforms of their education and training system. Commitment to the EQF shows that countries have embraced the objectives of improving lifelong learning, transparency of the education system to very large extent, thus indirectly contributing to wider EU goals linked to the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion.
- **The impact of the EQF on European cooperation in education and training:** The EQF has mainly developed cooperation among qualifications stakeholders in the context of the EQF advisory group. In parallel with the EQF advisory group, other forms of cooperation have developed, including regional cooperation among European countries. This intra-Europe cooperation gives sense to the EQF and translates the fact that close relations between education and training systems require coherence in the implementation of the EQF and imply cooperation in developing the NQF. This does not go against the objective of the EQF, but shows that it is able to accommodate all types of qualifications.
- **The impact of the EQF on international cooperation in education and training:** The EQF as a European tool has influenced the development of national and translational frameworks beyond Europe and activities at European level have effectively supported this potential impact beyond Europe. This process has been supported by the Commission, which has developed policy dialogue with non-EU countries regarding the development and revision of national qualifications framework (e.g. Australia), and the cooperation of ETF with partner countries, which has resulted in some of the NQFs developed in these countries being influenced by the EQF. Cooperation with third countries has taken place mainly at regional country level, but these are mostly information contacts and dialogue, which have not led to any type of formalisation of this cooperation at national level.
- **Sustainability of the EQF:** Given that work is continuing on the referencing process and there is considerable work to ensure that EQF levels are included on qualification documents, support to the EQF implementation is still needed and should be maintained, both to ensure continuity in the implementation and keep the momentum once countries have reached the objectives set in the EQF Recommendation.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents the evaluation conclusions and recommendations. The conclusions summarise the findings presented in chapters 4-8 of this report and are presented per evaluation theme (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and impact and sustainability). The recommendations focus on the future of the EQF. They are directed to the European Commission and, where relevant, to other stakeholders.

The ambition of the EQF Recommendation was to create a common reference framework for qualifications systems, covering general and vocational education and training and also able to accommodate qualifications acquired through (the validation of) non-formal and informal learning. Such a common framework was expected to facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications, improve mutual trust among qualifications stakeholders and also serve as a reference point for international sector organisations issuing qualifications. Ultimately, the EQF Recommendation aimed to contribute to wider lifelong learning goals and increase the mobility, employability and social integration of workers and learners.

Based on the evaluation findings, the following sub-sections summarise: the extent to which the objectives have been reached and what progress is still to be made (sub-section 9.1); how the structures put in place and resources allocated have supported these objectives (9.2); whether these objectives have been relevant to stakeholders' needs (9.3); and whether they have been coherent with other EU policies, instruments and tools in support to the same objectives (9.4). Finally, the section assesses the impact of the EQF Recommendation and introduces considerations relating to its future sustainability (9.5).

9.1 The effectiveness and intermediate impacts of the EQF Recommendation

The theme of 'effectiveness' includes the set of evaluation questions relating to progress in implementing the EQF Recommendation and associated impacts on qualification design across participating countries, in particular:

- Meeting EQF target dates for referencing national qualifications systems to the EQF (2010 target date) and for ensuring diplomas, Europass documents and certificates refer to the EQF level (2012 target date);
- Supporting the use of learning outcomes and promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- Serving as a reference tool regarding qualifications for stakeholders, including for international sector organisations.

9.1.1 The effectiveness of the EQF in relation to the EQF target dates and approaches to referencing

Effectiveness in relation to the target dates

Although the target dates were only met by a few countries⁹³, it is clear that countries are committed to working towards meeting the objectives (i.e. to reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF and to ensure that diplomas, Europass documents and certificates refer to the EQF level). Fully achieving these objectives has been a priority over doing so within the deadlines. Commitment to these objectives remains strong, even if the target dates have passed.

Recommendation 1 – The Commission should support countries that have not yet referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF to achieve this goal.

In order to keep the momentum and fully achieve the objectives of the EQF, countries that have not yet referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF should work towards this objective and find the right balance between effective implementation (in line with the objectives of the EQF) and timely implementation, so as to ensure the critical mass of countries that have their national qualifications levels related to the EQF is reached by the end of 2014.

⁹³ Four countries met the 2010 deadline, six met the 2012 deadline

The EQF advisory group has played an increasingly key role in supporting the referencing process, especially in terms of peer supervision and follow-up to the initial referencing process. The EQF advisory group should continue to play this role in the next period.

Recommendation 2 – The Commission should invite Countries that have referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF to regularly update the EQF advisory group on how feedback from the advisory group has been taken into account in implementation at national level.

The EQF is a dynamic tool and referencing reports are snapshots of the situation of a given country regarding the EQF at one point in time. National qualifications systems evolve and countries need to revisit and revise their referencing reports to remain in line with the national qualifications landscape.

Following the presentation of the referencing reports to the EQF advisory group, Cedefop and the Council of Europe summarises the comments of advisory group members in a brief note. Once the referencing report has been presented and feedback received in this note, countries should inform the advisory group of the extent to which they plan to take on-board the feedback received and provide a clear plan for revision of the report – if any. If some of the comments are not proposed to be taken on-board, this should be the object of a discussion within the advisory group members, so that the reasons for not taking these comments on-board are explained and made clear to all members.

Additional support activities could be proposed to target the specific needs of those countries that have presented their referencing report and are planning to review/update their referencing. This could include following-up on whether the NQF is still fit for purpose and in line with national developments in education and trainings, the extent to which it remains consistent with the EQF in practice, and maintaining momentum / stakeholders involvement at national level.

In any case, these activities should be designed building on experience gained in the last five years. This would ensure all countries benefit from lessons learned and revive commitment from countries that have completed their referencing.

These activities should be organised under the framework of the EQF advisory group in conjunction with the EQF NCPs

Recommendation 3 The Commission should support countries in the achievement of the second EQF objective of ensuring diplomas, Europass documents and certificates refer to the EQF level.

Countries should work towards achievement of the second EQF target date – ensuring diplomas, Europass documents and certificates refer to the EQF level. To support this, the Commission should ensure that those countries that have achieved this objective, present good practice examples to their peers, highlighting barriers to implementation and lessons learnt. This could be done as part of a peer learning activity which could then inform further support activities of the EQF advisory group and the EQF NCPs.

Effectiveness in relation to referencing

Almost all countries chose the NQF route to reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF, suggesting that the NQF was considered an adequate tool to implement the EQF Recommendation in various national policy contexts. It seems unlikely that all countries would have undertaken to develop an NQF within the same timescale without the EQF acting as a catalyst.

Overall, the referencing methods have been consistent enough to ensure transparency among EQF stakeholders, thus generating increased mutual trust among countries. The EQF advisory group activities (presentations and discussions of the referencing reports, peer learning activities, EQF notes) organised to support referencing have played an important role in that respect. There is evidence that the referencing criteria have supported a degree of consistency in the referencing process, but room for interpretation remains in the formulation of the referencing criteria, which may limit this contribution.

Recommendation 4 – The Commission should continue to organise activities in support of the referencing process.

Further activities to support referencing would be desirable in the years to come – at least during 2013 - and until few (or no) countries are still to present their referencing report. These activities could include:

- Methodological Peer Learning Activities on approaches to referencing: overview of experience gained, lessons learned and challenges for future referencing, e.g. how to effectively engage stakeholders in the referencing process;
- Peer Learning Activities on testing the consistency of the outcomes of referencing; for instance by comparing referencing outcomes in relation to specific qualifications, so as to either evidence the successes of referencing or to highlight consistency issues that remain to be addressed;
- Revision and update of the methodological support to referencing (notably the EQF note on Referencing National Qualifications levels to the EQF), taking on-board recent lessons learned, to ensure they are reflected in reference documents. This, for instance, could also include more recent referencing examples, 'do's and don'ts', etc.

9.1.2 The effectiveness of the EQF with regard to the use of learning outcomes and validation of validation of non-formal and informal learning

The EQF and the use of learning outcomes are widely seen as being closely linked at both national and European level. The EQF recommendation invited countries to use learning outcomes to describe qualification levels, therein contributing to the continued shift towards the use of learning outcomes. The aim was not only to describe qualifications levels using learning outcomes, but also to design curricula at national and provider level, including assessment in these terms.

Both the learning outcomes approach and the EQF implementation are still 'work-in-progress' in many countries, especially at the level of curriculum design. The evidence collected so far about the EQF's contribution to the expansion of the learning outcomes approach in Europe is scarce. The use of this approach is more advanced in VET. Moreover, in higher education, it is not always possible to distinguish the effects of the EQF from those of the QF-EHEA and ECTS. Although evidence of the effects of the EQF on the use of learning outcomes has been scarce so far, these effects are perceived to be potentially very significant in the future and, as such, would be worth investigating at a later date.

The reverse link between the EQF and learning outcomes is also observed. In countries where the learning outcomes approach is more established, EQF implementation is more straightforward. There appears to be mind-set in place in these countries associated with greater openness to the EQF model. This effect depends on countries' situation regarding the implementation of the EQF (whether an NQF has been designed yet or whether national qualifications levels have been referenced to the EQF) and the extent of learning outcomes use at national level (e.g. only in higher education or extended to other education sub-systems, used in course design/description as well as in assessments, etc.),

Given the link between the learning outcomes approach and the EQF, and given that the developments are undertaken in parallel in most countries, only an in-depth assessment of the impacts of the learning outcomes approach in education and training systems in Europe could evidence the extent to which this approach – including through the use of the EQF – has influenced a real shift towards learning outcomes.

Recommendation 5 – The European Commission should launch a European-wide assessment of the use of learning outcomes in practice and invite EQF NCPs to provide data about the use of learning outcomes in practice at national level.

In order to evidence the inter-relationship between the use of learning outcomes and the EQF, an assessment of the extent of the learning outcomes approach in European countries should be undertaken. Such an assessment should be carried out at the point when the majority of countries have referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF for at least 5 years, so that an impact from the EQF might be anticipated or measureable.

It should cover the extent of the use of learning outcomes in practice and go into detail on how learning outcomes are used, for instance, in course catalogues and in assessment guidelines, both at system and provider level.

Such an assessment would also focus on highlighting the links between the EQF – and the

development of NQFs – and the use of learning outcomes in countries more widely.

Although this seems an ambitious mandate for the EQF advisory group – given that their current priority should remain full implementation of the EQF objectives of referencing national qualifications systems to the EQF and for ensuring diplomas, Europass documents and certificates refer to the EQF level – such an assessment is intrinsically linked to the mandate and the EQF advisory group should be associated with such an assessment.

In order to prepare this assessment, the Commission should coordinate the collection of comparable and reliable data on the use of learning outcomes at country level. This could mean methodological support to EQF advisory group member and/or financial support to NCPs for data collection.

The 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning shows countries' commitment towards validation. It suggests that linking validation to the EQF/NQFs is likely to contribute to successful implementation. Countries expect the EQF to impact on validation in European countries, but only once NQFs are well-established and provided that they effectively promote validation in practice. For instance, the EQF implementation can bring validation higher up in the policy agenda, or improve its visibility. Evidence on the effects of the EQF on validation so far has been scarce. Where validation systems are in place, this typically pre-dates the EQF and is a consequence of a wider culture of validation of learning at national level.

However, expectations about the future contribution of the EQF to the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning are high and there is a clear sense that the EQF provides an opportunity to facilitate access to validation. This is most persuasively characterised in terms of the EQF providing a framework and quality guarantees to underpin validation systems in European countries.

Recommendation 6 – The Commission should ensure synergies at European level between the implementation of the EQF and the Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning, including through the EQF advisory group and invite and support countries to work towards synergies at national level.

The 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning foresees that the EQF advisory group should follow-up on the implementation of this 2012 Recommendation. Although this would ensure coherence among these two EU education and training initiatives and contribute to facilitating the promotion of validation in NQFs, the EQF advisory group should primarily focus on achieving the EQF objectives set in the 2008 Recommendation. In practical terms, it would be preferable to separate the work on validation from wider activities of the EQF advisory group, for instance by creating a sub-group of the EQF advisory group focusing on validation, reporting to the plenary EQF advisory group. The mandate of such a working group would be to prepare follow-up activities that would be carried out at country level on validation practices.

Countries should be encouraged and supported to keep working towards validation of non-formal and informal learning in line with the EQF and as part of their commitment to implement the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning (thus having relevant arrangements in place by 2018).

For the sake of coherence in implementation, countries should ensure synergies in the work on the implementation of the EQF and on validation of non-formal and informal learning. This implies involving the country member of the EQF advisory group (or sub-group) in decisions and activities related to validation of non-formal and informal learning in line with the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation,

Countries, through their EQF advisory group member, should follow-up on validation of non-formal and informal learning at national level, with methodological support from the Commission (see Recommendation 6).

9.1.3 The effectiveness of the EQF as reference point (national and international level)

Stakeholders' awareness and understanding of the EQF and its national implementation is high among direct qualifications stakeholders (insiders, i.e. those directly involved in the EQF and NQF development, such as national authorities in charge of education and/or training, qualifications authorities and – to a lesser extent – representatives of social partners). Awareness is much lower among other groups, such as the large majority of social partners, education and training providers,

learners, as well as the general public. The effect of this lack of awareness and understanding on the overall effectiveness of the EQF is untested, but the evaluation findings suggest that trust in the EQF increases as a result of increased understanding of the EQF. As a consequence, the EQF is only to a limited extent considered by stakeholders to be a reference point on qualifications.

Stakeholder engagement in EQF and NQF developments varies greatly between countries. In some cases, national authorities have preferred to communicate about the referencing process to wider stakeholders once the referencing process was over, rather than while it was still underway. There is a persuasive rationale for waiting to market the benefits to users until qualification comparison is available with all or most countries (although the difference between this wider marketing of the EQF and the involvement of other groups, such as social partner representative bodies, in national development is not always clear).

The EQF Recommendation aims to facilitate transnational mobility for workers and learners and contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market.

Recommendation 7 – The Commission should support activities aiming to increase stakeholders’ awareness, understanding and interest in the EQF. These activities should be carried out by NCPs.

The Commission should support EQF NCPs’ action towards increasing stakeholder interest in the EQF and making it clear what is in it for them. This goes beyond awareness raising and implies targeted communication strategies.

Social partners should be considered a priority target group, although which social partners to target and how to better reach them should be left up to each country to decide.

Data collected for this evaluation shows little evidence that the EQF is a reference point for international sector organisations, i.e. the extent to which the EQF facilitates consistency in the award of international sector qualifications at national level.

Following debate in the EQF advisory group about whether these qualifications could be directly or indirectly referenced to the EQF, it was decided that references to sectoral qualifications to the EQF should be made via NQF first. There is therefore no mandate for the EQF advisory group to position international sector qualifications against to the EQF. It does not mean that the EQF advisory group should not ensure effective dialogue with organisations in charge of these sector qualifications and propose synergies, when relevant.

There are examples of in-depth work on the relationship between the EQF, NQFs and sector qualifications from the EQF pilot projects. Some work in this area has also been carried out under projects supported by the European Social Fund. These projects highlight challenges (e.g. an international sector qualification that would not be referenced at the same level through different NQFs) and opportunities created by the EQF to facilitate comparability and transparency of qualifications and thus facilitate mobility. As such, these projects are important tests of the credibility of and benefits from the EQF. There is a strong case for supporting further activity of this type, not least because it appears to be an effective way of giving greater visibility to the EQF at sector level.

Recommendation 8 – The European Commission should support ‘testing’ relations between international qualifications and the EQF/NQFs.

The EU should support ‘testing’ how international sector qualifications relate to the EQF/NQFs. International sector organisations and EQF countries interested in participating should also support this process.

9.2 The efficiency of the EQF and its implementation structures

The evaluation addressed issues related to the efficiency of the EQF approach and its implementation structures. It assessed the overall effectiveness of support provided by the European Commission and the structures at European and national level for EQF implementation, including whether these structures could be modified to increase efficiency or reduce the burden on stakeholders.

9.2.1 The efficiency of the EQF advisory group

The EQF advisory group meets the purpose of “soft control/guidance” of national referencing processes, and fulfils its role in terms of ensuring trust and common understanding among the participating countries. The presentation of the referencing reports is arguably the most valuable aspect of the advisory group’s work. It has a motivating effect on participating countries, through their EQF advisory group member, to pursue the effort towards the EQF objectives.

The EQF advisory group, together with its sub-groups and with the contribution of Cedefop and ETF, have also provided practical support to the referencing process, e.g. through the establishment of referencing criteria and provision of expertise and reference documents (EQF notes, studies undertaken by Cedefop and ETF). There is an apparent need for these materials to be regularly updated to reflect the latest EQF developments. As the referencing criteria, in particular, play such an important role in establishing a common and comparable approach to national qualifications, it is significant that this dimension has been led by national representatives working collaboratively through the EQF advisory group structure.

Recommendation 9 – The Commission should encourage EQF advisory group to revise and update the EQF reference documents

In line with Recommendation 4, EQF reference documents should be revised and regularly updated, so as to reflect the latest EQF developments. This would include review and updating of the methodological support to referencing, e.g. the EQF note on Referencing National Qualifications levels to the EQF.

The EQF advisory group is also an effective way to ensure networking, peer-learning and the sharing of experiences among participating countries. It therefore effectively facilitates dialogue between countries on qualification issues. In that respect, the peer learning activities (PLAs) that have been organised provide an important contribution by making it clearer to EQF advisory group members how the EQF could work in practice. These PLAs have addressed issues relating to EQF levels (e.g. lower levels of the EQF, positioning of the school leaving certificate and higher education levels) and contributed to a better understanding of the challenges linked to EQF implementation. This type of activity should be continued and reinforced, as suggested in Recommendation 4.

Recommendation 10 – The European Commission should continue to organise Peer Learning Activities.

As suggested in Recommendation 1 and Recommendation 4, future EQF PLAs should propose methodological support for referencing, covering an overview of experience gained, lessons learned and challenges for future referencing.

Other PLAs could cover topics such as those suggested in Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 3 and targeting the specific needs of those countries that have already presented their referencing report, e.g. lessons learnt on maintaining the NQF as a dynamic yet stable tool, or experience from countries that have referenced to EQF levels in new diplomas, Europass documents and certificates.

As suggested in Recommendation 5 and Recommendation 6, the Commission should provide methodological support to data collection on the extent of the use of learning outcomes in EQF countries and to follow-up on validation of non-formal and informal learning. This could be effectively supported by PLAs covering these topics.

The European Commission plays an important role in managing the work of the EQF advisory group (agenda setting, chairing meetings, reporting, organisation and logistics). Although the efficiency of the work of the Commission is not questioned, and although it was justified to have the Commission play a strong steering role in the first years following the Recommendation, it would be appropriate to assess the opportunity to give a greater role to members in the coordination of the EQF advisory group.

Recommendation 11 – The Commission should consult the EQF advisory group on the whether it should be steered by a group of members, with the support of the Commission, as foreseen in the rules of procedure.

As suggested in the rules of procedure of the EQF advisory group, and as spontaneously recommended by a minority of members⁹⁴ of the EQF advisory group, the EQF advisory group should assess the opportunity to create a 'bureau' (steering group) that would contribute to defining the agenda of advisory group plenary meetings, together with the Commission. Such a steering group would ensure greater ownership of the EQF advisory group by its members.

In terms of the composition of this steering group, it should include three to four country representatives (covering both countries that have referenced and countries that have not), and two to three social partner representatives. Besides the Commission, Cedefop, ETF and the Council of Europe should also be associated with the work of the bureau.

The meetings of the steering group could be organised by the Commission and chaired by one of its members. The use of virtual meeting facilities should support the work of the steering group, so as to avoid unnecessary travel.

9.2.2 The efficiency of the EQF NCPs and NCP grants

The EQF Recommendation calls for NCPs to reference levels of qualifications within national qualifications systems to the EQF levels (task 1), ensure that a transparent methodology is used to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF and that the resulting decisions are published (task 2), provide access to information and guidance to stakeholders on how national qualifications relate to the EQF through national qualifications systems (task 3), and promote their participation (task 4).

NCPs are implementing their tasks as described in the EQF Recommendation in an effective way, with the important caveat that, in many cases, the NCPs have focused only on part of their assigned tasks (depending on their countries' progress regarding the implementation of the EQF). The extent of their involvement in the referencing process varies by country, depending on the structural and organisational aspects at national level described above. This influences the extent to which NCPs are perceived as a reference point for information, guidance and advice regarding the implementation of the EQF in the country and, indirectly, their room for action in promoting and disseminating information about the EQF and its implementation and the effectiveness of these actions.

Recommendation 12 – The Commission should continue to build the capacities of EQF NCPs to carry out their tasks as foreseen in the EQF Recommendations. Additionally, the NCPs should be used to support to collect data about the implementation of the EQF, as foreseen in Recommendation 5 and Recommendation 6.

EQF NCP grants have been used to support a wide range of EQF-related activities. This has primarily involved communication activities targeting a large audience, such as hosting conferences, setting up websites and developing dissemination tools. To a lesser extent it has also included activities to support effective management, including methodology design, stakeholder consultations, feasibility studies and evaluations. The grants have been used to a limited extent so far (in the 2012 call, around two thirds of the amount available has been requested and two thirds of the amount requested was used in the calls 2010 and 2011). However, as several countries are still in the process of referencing their national systems to the EQF, it may explain why this use had been limited so far and it could be expected that financial support to NCP activities will still be needed in the future (e.g. for dissemination activities). It would therefore be appropriate to continue NCP grants to support these activities.

Recommendation 13 – The award of NCP activity grants should be continued to support activities linked to referencing at national level.

NCP grants should be continued to support activities linked to referencing at national level (research to support the design of the NQF or referencing report, stakeholders' consultations, etc.) or information and communication about the EQF and the NQF. When relevant, other funds such as the European Social Funds could alternatively be used to support these actions. Future NCP grants could also support activities suggested in Recommendation 5 and Recommendation 6.

⁹⁴ Five members – four country representatives and one social partner representative

9.2.3 The efficiency of the EQF pilot projects

Overall, the EQF pilot projects have covered themes relevant to EQF implementation (e.g. develop and test methods for referencing to the EQF, support the development of NQFs, and strengthen the application of core EQF principles). However, the use of project outcomes has been limited. While participation is clearly beneficial to project partners and their institutions, and although there are examples of effects at sector level and on policy development and implementation at national level, the outcomes of EQF pilot projects are not systematically taken into account at European level. Similarly, the dissemination strategies of the EQF pilot projects have reached EQF insiders effectively, but their impact beyond these core stakeholders is rather limited.

9.3 The relevance of the EQF Recommendation

The theme of ‘relevance’ aims to assess the appropriateness of the policy instrument and its principles, structure are relevant policy tools in relation to European strategy and key flagship initiatives in the domain of education and training.

9.3.1 The relevance of the EQF design

The EQF aimed to provide a structure of levels and categories of learning outcome descriptors, able to accommodate all kinds of learning. This overarching ambition of the EQF has been embraced by all countries. Most countries have developed (or are planning to develop) a comprehensive qualifications framework which includes all qualifications from formal education and training systems (general, vocational education and training, including higher and adult education and promoting the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning), although this has caused difficulties in practice and delayed the referencing process in some cases. Many of these difficulties are the result of the scale of ambition and the complexity of achieving alignment between what remain, in many countries, distinct education and training sub-systems.

There are examples of countries that have developed frameworks with more or less than eight levels (e.g. Bulgaria, Ireland, France, Norway, Slovenia and United Kingdom) owing to national considerations. This is a characteristic that is more common where the national framework precedes the EQF. It is therefore notable that where countries are developing NQFs subsequent to the design of the EQF Recommendation, these are more likely to follow an eight-level structure, although some countries are considering a different number of levels (e.g. to cover qualifications levels below EQF level 1). Overall, there is fairly wide consensus that, irrespective of the precise level-to-level fit between the EQF and national frameworks, the number of EQF levels is in line with the ambition to accommodate all European national (and regional) qualifications structures. In this sense, the number of EQF levels is considered relevant, workable and appropriate.

The same conclusion applies to learning outcomes descriptors. Even if issues have been identified in relation to learning outcomes descriptors linked to specific EQF levels: levels 1 and 2, level 5 and levels 6-8 in a limited number of cases, the learning outcome descriptors are considered appropriate and capable of covering all types of qualifications. It is suggested not to change these descriptors.

Recommendation 14 – The number of EQF levels and the learning outcomes descriptors should not be changed, so as to ensure stability of the tool in terms of its main features.

9.3.2 The relevance of the Recommendation as a policy instrument

Given the objective of the EQF as a reference tool, the Recommendation was an appropriate approach to supporting transparency and comparability of qualifications at European level, while recognising the national basis of qualifications systems. There are no apparent alternative approaches that would have been likely to achieve the same level of commonality in approach and timing between countries.

Several elements the Recommendation supported implementation. The existence of implementation target dates generated momentum and helped to reinforce commitment and mutual trust in the EQF's potential to reach its objectives. The fact that the Recommendation and its annexes could be used as a common reference documents for all stakeholders, thus ensuring common understanding of the EQF objectives and mutual trust among countries, also contributed, by its nature, to the effectiveness of the EQF.

Beyond the instrumental aspect of the Recommendation or the impetus it gives, policy support at national level is considered the main factor to ensure commitment, progress and thus mutual trust among participating countries. The Recommendation's effectiveness in practice depends on the policy support to the initiative at national level. The potential effect of the Recommendation will depend on how high the issue concerned is in the policy agenda at national level. The challenge here to date (and in future) is that EQF development and implementation takes considerable time, and national policy support has to be maintained and sustained to some degree over a period of years.

9.3.3 The relevance of the EQF to wider European strategy for education and training

Overall, the EQF is highly relevant to ET2020 and EU2020 flagship initiatives Youth on the Move and the Agenda for new skills and jobs. In particular, it effectively supports mobility and employability-related objectives.

The EQF, in its design, aims to blur the barriers to all types of mobility (horizontal and vertical), thus making lifelong learning a reality. The effects of the EQF on mobility are hard to perceive for the time being – because implementation is still at an early stage. It may, however, be anticipated that a fully implemented EQF would effectively facilitate mobility of learners across education and training sub-systems, levels and countries, in line with the ET2020 mobility objective. While the activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation are not, in isolation, sufficient to addressing the mobility objectives of ET2020, it is clear that the EQF provides a tool that might be seen as a precondition for achieving these objectives.

In the context of recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, the EQF also supports re-skilling and skills progression in a way that is strongly aligned to labour markets experiencing rapid changes, as the existence of an effective validation of non-formal and informal learning system can function as a motivation for low-skilled workers to develop further professionally and socially. It also supports employability, given that it aims to function as a platform that will permit the recognition of learning irrespective of the path taken or the background of the learner.

Furthermore, the EQF levels can function as a common language between the education system and the labour market. The EQF is also likely to contribute to innovation, through promotion of the learning outcomes approach in general and of creativity competences in particular.

Moreover, the promotion and use of the learning outcomes approach, the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning, the existence of a reference framework for qualifications in Europe (as set in the EQF Recommendation), and the importance of building mutual trust among countries, which derives from the EQF and implementation, are likely to contribute to achieving the mobility and employability-related objectives of these initiatives.

Recommendation 15 – Given the potential contribution of the EQF to wider EU goals and the European strategy for education and training, it is important to ensure that this potential is actually used and maximised. To do so, the Commission should ensure coherence between the EQF and other policies in the field of education and training and activities co-financed under Erasmus + (the education and training funding programme 2014-2020). Furthermore, the Commission should support national and regional authorities in ensuring coherence of their actions and policies with regard to qualifications and the EQF and the NQF implementation, as well as other related policies.

At European level, the Commission should ensure coherence in these initiatives and make sure that the EQF is referred to in all relevant policy documents. This recommendation should also be reflected in funding programmes. Ideally, pedagogical material (educational content, such as educational programmes, courses and course support material) developed in EQF countries, in particular with public funding from the EU and/or from participating countries, should be referenced to the appropriate qualifications level in relevant NQFs. This could, for instance, be added as a requirement for funding under the education and training funding programme 2014-2020.

At national level, national and regional authorities should also ensure coherence of their action with regard to qualifications and ensure that reference is made to the EQF and the NQF, where relevant. Given their mandate and privileged position to observe the implementation of the EQF at national level, the NCPs are well positioned to monitor the visibility of the EQF in national legislation and programmes. They could carry out this task on top of the NCP tasks as assigned to them in the EQF Recommendation.

9.4 The coherence of the EQF Recommendation in relation to other EU initiatives

The EQF shares common or complementary ambitions to facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications with other tools and processes⁹⁵ at European level.

Alignment of the policy principles and objectives for different initiatives – i.e. whether they are consistent in important areas of overlap and whether they are linked in a way that is mutually-reinforcing and supports improved outcomes – influences implementation of related initiatives. The main areas in which the EQF overlaps with other initiatives relates to the use of learning outcomes, the QF-EHEA and the quality assurance of education and training.

Overall, coherence of the initiatives has been ensured at European level between the EQF and EQAVET and ECVET, including through cooperating in management and organisation at European level. At national level, cooperation depends substantially on structural factors. It tends to be higher in countries where staff in charge of these initiatives are part of the same organisation or have a history of working together. Where co-ordination between the implementation of different initiatives has been actively pursued at national level, this delivers efficiencies for national agencies and helps to ensure consistency in approach.

Although the organisation of joint events bringing together representatives of EQAVET, EQF and ECVET was welcomed by participants and considered to contribute to increased mutual understanding among stakeholders, it is at national level that further cooperation should take place and synergies be developed.

Implementation of the EQF (second milestone) is dependent from implementation of the Europass – especially given the objective to have EQF levels reflected in Europass certificates – but synergies have been limited so far. This is partly due to delays in meeting the second EQF deadline. However, the evaluation also found little evidence of cooperation between EQF and Europass initiatives at national level (except where these initiatives were the responsibility of the same organisations).

Due to the pre-existence of relevant higher education initiatives (the qualifications framework for higher education; quality assurance principles in higher education; promotion of the use of learning outcomes through ECTS), ensuring coherence with these initiatives and tools has been key to the development and implementation of the EQF. The risk of divergence has been avoided thanks to co-operation among these initiatives and tools since the start of the EQF. This cooperation has further developed in recent years, with an increasing involvement of higher education and Bologna process stakeholders in the EQF and mechanisms in place to ensure coherence between the EQF and the QF-EHEA. This cooperation should be continued.

Cooperation has also been developed beyond the education and training area, in particular with the framework of the ESCO initiative. Strong links have been developed in the conceptual phase of ESCO. There is a potential future synergy between the EQF and ESCO, once the latter reaches a more mature stage of development. To facilitate this, co-operation between the EQF advisory group and the ESCO Committee should be maintained, so as to ensure a regular follow-up. The EQF advisory group should take the opportunity to keep providing input into ESCO developments.

Regarding professional qualifications, the Commission has investigated room for closer cooperation between the PQD and the EQF, but the extent to which these synergies happen in practice will depend on the upcoming policy decisions on the revision of the PQD.

Cooperation among transparency tools at European and national level is crucial to maximise the effects of these tools. To ensure these effects are maximised, it is essential that transparency initiatives and tools are developed and implemented in parallel. At European level, these synergies should be ensured by the European Commission, which should keep developing complementary initiatives and implementing them in coherence with other tools. Synergies at national level highly depend on structural and organisation factors - i.e. who is in charge of the initiative at national level

⁹⁵ including EQAVET and ECVET in the vocational arena, as well as the tools associated with the Bologna process (Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area; ECTS; Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area), Europass, the European Skills, Competences and Occupations taxonomy (ESCO) and the Professional Qualifications Directive

and how organisation(s) in charge of the initiatives cooperate - and on policy and implementation priority setting at national level.

Recommendation 16 – The European Commission should continue ensuring cooperation and further increase synergies with other European transparency and mobility tools and instruments at European level. The Commission should equally remind staff and organisations in charge of the EQF and other relevant initiatives at national level to work together towards achievements of these objectives and ensure synergies happen.

The European Commission should continue ensuring cooperation with other European and EU level transparency and mobility tools and instruments – in particular the EQAVET and ECVET regarding vocational education and training, and the QF-EHEA, ESG QA HE and ECTS in higher education, with the support from the Council of Europe.

Further cooperation with Europass should be investigated, in particular as progress towards the second EQF target dates, although late, will become a priority for EQF countries that have referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF.

Cooperation beyond the education and training area – with ESCO and the PQD – should also be pursued, so as to ensure the EQF advisory group is informed and involved as required in the developments in these areas. The EQF advisory group should consider inviting observers with responsibility for these initiatives to participate in EQF advisory group meetings (or at least ensure that they are informed about the meetings' outcomes).

9.5 The impact and sustainability of the EQF Recommendation

The theme of 'impact' focuses on EQF influence of national practice, via the development of NQFs and as a tool to support co-operation. Sustainability refers to the level of continuing commitment to the EQF beyond the presentation of referencing reports to ensure that longer-term impact is achieved.

9.5.1 The policy impact of the EQF

The EQF has contributed to changing the way in which qualifications are classified and defined at national level, but this impact so far rather depends on whether the country has had a qualifications culture in place and on the stage reached in the implementation of the EQF/NQF.

The overall impact of the EQF on education and training policies has been limited so far, although there are examples of countries in which the EQF has been an opportunity to launch wider reforms of their education and training system. This limited impact is mainly due to the fact that the EQF implementation is still at its early stage in most countries. However, there are high expectations in terms of further impacts of the EQF in the long term, once implementation has progressed across countries.

Overall, for the time being, commitment to the EQF shows that countries have embraced the objectives of improving lifelong learning, transparency of the education system to very large extent, thus indirectly contributing to wider EU goals linked to the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion.

Recommendation 17 – The Commission should follow-up on and evaluate the impact of the EQF Recommendation, once implementation has progressed more significantly.

In line with Recommendation 5 and Recommendation 6, the EU should follow-up on the impact of the EQF Recommendation, not only on the use of learning outcomes, curriculum development and on promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning, but also on policy reform at national level. Such an assessment should be undertaken around five of years after a critical mass of countries have referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF, so as to ensure sufficient evidence can be collected.

9.5.2 The impact of the EQF on European and international cooperation in education and training

The EQF has mainly developed cooperation among qualifications stakeholders in the context of the EQF advisory group. For instance, activities such as PLAs, have reinforced European co-operation

among participating countries. This has also influenced other forms of joint working (e.g. project development) and, as such, tends to contribute to the sustainability of the EQF.

In parallel with the EQF advisory group, other forms of cooperation have developed, including regional cooperation among European countries. This intra-Europe cooperation gives sense to the EQF and translates the fact that close relations between education and training systems require coherence in the implementation of the EQF and imply cooperation in developing the NQF. This does not go against the objective of the EQF, but shows that it is able to accommodate all types of qualifications.

Regional cooperation has also been developed beyond Europe. These forms of regional cooperation suggest the international influence of the EQF. Cooperation with third countries has taken place mainly at country level, but these are mostly information contacts and dialogue, which have not led to any type of formalisation of this cooperation at national level. There are also examples of EU-level cooperation between with EQF and non-EQF countries.

This process has also been supported by the Commission. This support has taken the form of a dialogue with non-EU countries regarding the development and revision of national qualifications framework (e.g. with Australia). The ETF has also promoted and reinforced cooperation between EQF and EQF partner countries (e.g. Bologna countries). Both these forms of support have contributed to NQFs developed in these countries being influenced by the EQF.

The EQF as a European tool has influenced the development of national and translational frameworks beyond Europe and activities at European level have effectively supported this potential impact beyond Europe. There is room for closer cooperation with countries that do not participate in the EQF. This also provides opportunities to increase EQF visibility beyond Europe.

Recommendation 18 – The Commission should support the work of EQF advisory group on the international dimension of the EQF.

The international impact of the EQF is an excellent opportunity to improve the visibility of the EQF within Europe. This opportunity should be taken on-board by the EQF advisory group and international cooperation should be reinforced. This work should be carried out in cooperation with the Commission, Cedefop, the Council of Europe and ETF – as part of the EQF advisory group, but also with UNESCO, which follows-up on the international developments of qualifications frameworks.

9.5.3 Sustainability of the EQF

Given that work is continuing on the referencing process and there is considerable work to ensure that EQF levels are included on qualification documents, there is a need to continue support to the EQF implementation, both to ensure continuity in the implementation and to maintain the momentum once countries have reached the objectives set in the EQF Recommendation.