



DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

State of play of the European Qualifications Framework implementation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

The EQF is an instrument aimed at promoting workers' and learners' mobility and lifelong learning through referencing national qualifications systems. Analysing the relevance, implementation and first outcomes, one can conclude that although the implementation of the EQF could be assessed as successful, some important issues can be identified, that form a serious test to the full and trustworthy implementation of the EQF. Nevertheless, there is a call for continuation of the EQF implementation provided that the right conditions have been met.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BE-F	Belgium Walloon community
BE-VL	Belgium Flemish community
BG	Bulgaria
BIBB	Bundesinstituts für Berufsbildung (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CEEP	European Centre of Employers and Enterprises Providing Public services
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany
DG EAC	Directorate General Education and Culture
DG EMPL	Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
DG MARKT	Directorate General Internal Market and Services
DK	Denmark
DQR	Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen (German Qualifications Framework)
ECTS	European Credit and Transfer System
ECVET	European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training
EE	Estonia
EL	Greece
ENIC-NARIC	European Network of Information Centres - National Academic (& Professional) Recognition and Information Centre.
EP	European Parliament
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EQF AG	EQF Advisory Group
EQF-REF	EQF Referencing Process
ES	Spain
ESCO	European Skills, Competencies and Occupations taxonomy
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines

ETF	European Training Foundation
ETUC	European Trade Union Congress
EU	European Union
EUA	European University Association
EUCIS-LLL	European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning
FI	Finland
FR	France
HE	Higher Education
HQR	Qualifikationsrahmen für Deutsche Hochschulabschlüsse (German Higher Education Qualifications Framework)
HR	Croatia
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
ILO	International Labour Organization
IS	Iceland
ISFOL	Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori (Italian Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers)
IT	Italy
KMK	Kultusministerkonferenz (The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany)
KSC	Knowledge, Skills and Competences
LI	Liechtenstein
LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
LV	Latvia
MS	Member State
MT	Malta
NCP	National Coordination Point
NL	Netherlands
NLOF	Nederlands kwalificatiekader (Dutch Qualifications Framework)
NO	Norway

NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OEAD	Österreichischer Austauschdienst (Austrian agency for international mobility and cooperation in education, science and research)
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
PES	Public Employment Services
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment for Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PL	Poland
PLA	Peer Learning Activity
PLOTEUS	Portal on Learning Opportunities throughout the European Space
POF	Krajowych Ram Kwalifikacji (Polish Qualifications Framework)
PT	Portugal
QF	Qualifications Frameworks
QF EHEA	Qualifications Framework European Higher Education Area
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
TK	Turkey
UEAPME	European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
UK	United Kingdom
UK (SCOT)	United Kingdom, Scotland
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YH	Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning is an instrument, established within the context of the European cooperation in the field of Education and Training, aimed at promoting workers' and learners' mobility and lifelong learning. The summary will provide a concise presentation of the outcomes of this study, assessing the relevance, the implementation and the outcomes of the EQF. Finally, we conclude by presenting the conclusions and recommendations.

Relevance of the EQF for lifelong learning

The EQF aims to relate different countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework of eight levels. In the 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), Member States (MS) are invited to:

- relate their national qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework by 2010;
- indicate the EQF level at each new qualification by 2012;
- use an approach based on learning outcomes when defining and describing qualifications, and promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- promote and apply the principles of quality assurance in education and training;
- designate a national coordination point.

The need to foster lifelong learning as a basic component of the European social model and to facilitate workers' and learners' mobility by increased transparency of qualifications systems is deemed a necessity given demographic change, rapid social, technological and economic change and the ongoing globalisation and mobility of workers between European and third countries. Through the EQF, qualifications and education systems become more comparable and transparent, finally promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries, mobility between education systems and increased opportunities for lifelong learning.

The development of the EQF and the implementation of the recommendation has been widely promoted at European level, it is closely related to European education agenda's (especially for VET and HE) and it respects the principle of subsidiarity. Also, there is clearly momentum, world-wide, for establishing qualifications frameworks.

There are different types of qualifications frameworks (communication, reform and transformational frameworks). The EQF, as a transnational QF, is regarded as a communication framework (a translation device). The NQFs which are designed, developed and implemented in the MS represent all three types of frameworks.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the intervention logic of the EQF appears to be solid. The EQF presented clear objectives (promoting workers' and learners' mobility and lifelong learning) and qualifications frameworks appear to be a highly relevant tool for pursuing these objectives through providing more transparency and comparability between qualifications systems. However, despite being aimed at the labour market, the EQF in its design is mainly related to education policy, and less to the world of work.

The EQF is, in its general objective and structure, closely related to other European education initiatives and tools (such as ECVET (European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training), Europass, EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational

Education and Training), ESG (European Standards and Guidelines), QF EHEA (Qualifications Framework European Higher Education Area), validation of non-formal and informal learning) and in theory these initiatives are mutually supportive. However, it is too early to fully identify the effects of these initiatives and their impact on the functioning of the EQF, since these are at an early stage of development. Also, the EQF is related to initiatives governed by other Directorates General (DG), such as the European Skills, Competencies and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy (DG EMPL and DG EAC, and the Professional Qualifications Directive 2005/36 on the recognition of professional qualifications (DG MARKT). With regard to the latter, some clear differences can be identified since the EQF is an outcome based system of eight levels, while the Directive includes a five level system based on input variables. Alignment between the two systems is therefore recommended.

Implementation of the EQF for lifelong learning

In the Recommendation on the EQF the MS voluntarily agreed amongst other things to work on referencing their qualifications to the EQF levels. The European Commission can, under the subsidiarity principle, only play a facilitating role. In order to encourage MS to follow up on the recommendation, several instruments are available under the Open Method of Coordination. The open method of coordination is 'designed to help MS to progressively develop their policies'. From previous research on the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in other policy fields, conditions can be distilled that are crucial for a **successful implementation of the OMC**, namely: 1) preparatory political involvement; 2) common concern; 3) high level of institutionalisation; 4) availability of specific objectives, benchmarks and indicators; 5) involvement and cooperation of stakeholders, and 6) presence of conflict between MS with incentive or reluctance to act. The key findings are structured along these conditions (findings are described both at EU and MS level).

1) Preparatory political involvement

Steps are often taken in the past that have led to an increased awareness of, or involvement in a topic. A certain foundation needs to be existent in order to continue developing a policy field. This certainly applies to the EU level where many MS need to be familiar with the topic, but also on the MS level itself where the policy field needs to have had a certain history.

At EU level:

- The EQF has known a long development period before it was actually formalised with a Treaty-based Recommendation.
- The commitment amongst EU level stakeholders is strong.
- The Recommendation on the EQF is based on extensive studies and consultations.

At MS level:

- There are major differences between MS in their starting positions. Some MS already had frameworks in place, or had experience with the learning outcome approach, others did not.
- Most MS have been involved in the EQF project long before the 2008 Recommendation, but it remains questionable whether all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, employees and the educational sector, at MS level have been involved to such an extent that mutual ownership is being created.
- In most countries, studies (e.g. consultations, technical studies, mapping exercises, pilot studies) have been conducted to provide a solid grounding of an NQF and the referencing to the EQF.

2) Common concern

There should be a common concern among MS that it is important to develop a certain policy field. There should be a European discourse on the topic in order to gain similar understanding of the definitions, the instruments available and an agreement to reach a certain quality level. As a result, a feeling of shared responsibility should be created which is the main drive behind the policy developments made and which also serves as a motivation for improvement of national policies.

At EU level:

- The EQF is built upon a common concern amongst MS and EU level stakeholders.
- This common concern is further supported by notes and guidelines to support MS in implementing the 2008 Recommendation. The process can be characterised by 'learning by doing', so therefore the knowledge-base evolved during the process. This evolution is captured by notes drawn up by Cedefop and the European Commission to guide MS in the process.

At MS level:

- Although the terminology used within the EQF Recommendation is not always consistent with other European initiatives (e.g. the concept of 'competence' differs), the language is clear enough for MS to relate to their own initiatives.
- Concerning the referencing process, some difficulties are encountered by MS. The most important difficulties relate to justifying the link between level descriptors of the national system/framework and the EQF and applying the learning outcome approach. Other difficulties relate to positioning certain qualifications (e.g. school leaving certificate), establishing procedures for validation of non-formal and informal learning and applying quality assurance systems attuned to the learning outcome approach.
- It remains difficult to see how the common concern develops at 'ground level' (i.e. education providers, workers, employers and citizens). In order to make sure that the EQF has relevance to the world of work and education at national level, this common concern at ground level needs to be further developed.

3) Institutionalisation

A high level of institutionalisation means that an organisational structure exists where people continuously work on the coordination and improvement of a specific sector. Someone has to take on the role of coordinator in order to coordinate a large scale cooperation process such as the OMC.

At EU level:

- The OMC for the implementation of EQF is Treaty based by means of the 2008 Recommendation.
- For the period after April 2013, a new mandate is required to continue working on the implementation of the EQF at EU level.
- Roles and responsibilities at EU level are clearly defined between the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG), European Commission, Cedefop, Council of Europe, European Training Foundation (ETF), MS and other stakeholders (e.g. social partners).
- The human resources within the European Commission to coordinate the work appear to be rather limited; however, there is no indication that this is hampering their facilitating role, which seems to work very well.

At MS level:

- The division of roles and responsibilities at MS level depends on the **intensity of the** approach taken to the implementation of the EQF and there is a tendency that existing role divisions between groups of stakeholders are continued, although slight changes in structures, involving other stakeholders, are sometimes recommendable.
- In most countries the implementation of the Recommendation on the EQF is in the hands of the Ministry of Education (or alike). Some countries deliberately choose to position the coordination of the development of an NQF outside the Ministry of Education, to position the qualifications framework closer to the labour market and to develop mutual ownership of the framework. This seems to have positive outcomes on the labour market orientation of the framework.

4) Availability of specific objectives, benchmarks and indicators

When clear objectives, benchmarks and indicators are lacking, it is often difficult to stimulate concrete actions and to measure results. A successful OMC therefore, includes specific objectives, benchmarks and indicators.

At EU level:

- Objectives have been set at EU level and appropriate monitoring systems have been put into place (e.g. EQF AG, facilitated by the European Commission and Cedefop).
- Although clear EU targets are established within the framework of EU2020 and ET2020, there is no explicit link between the EQF and these targets, concerning the manner in which the EQF will contribute to reaching these targets (e.g. on labour and learning mobility and participation in lifelong learning). It should be clearly monitored how the EQF contributes to these targets.

At MS level:

- The objectives of the Recommendation are clearly set and deadlines are specified.
- With regard to the first deadline (referencing national systems to EQF levels), most countries will not finalise their referencing report within the given deadline. Nevertheless, the delay will not be problematic, since all participating countries will finalise their referencing reports within approximately two years.
- More problematic is the progress in relation to the second deadline, including a reference to the appropriate EQF level at each new qualification and Europass document. Many countries have not even started working on procedures to guarantee that this will happen, even those that already finalised their referencing report. This is a concern, since this second step enforces the EQF to touch the ground in MS.

5) Involvement and cooperation of stakeholders

The involvement and cooperation of stakeholders is of crucial importance for the success of the OMC, as the method is theoretically supposed to work bottom-up. Guidance and coordination at the community level will only be effective and sustainable, if the programme is supported by the MS their civil society and actively implemented at the local level.

At EU level:

- Different groups of stakeholders have been involved from the start and are still involved as members of the EQF AG.
- A closer involvement of other DGs having a natural stake in the implementation of the EQF (i.e. DG EMPL and DG MARKT) could be further stimulated to increase the labour market orientation of the EQF.

At MS level:

- A distinction can be made between two groups of stakeholders, namely the educational sector and labour market related stakeholders.
- In general the first group (educational sector) is more profoundly engaged than the second group (labour market related stakeholders).
- It appears difficult to have the labour market side involved, also due to a lack of interest from the employers' side, who in some countries regard the EQF/NQF as not being relevant for them. This creates a serious threat to the pursued mutual ownership of NQFs and to the role these frameworks are envisaged to play in relation to the labour market.

6) Presence of conflict between MS with incentive or reluctance to act

Because of a conflict of opinions, the MS with an incentive to act will try to persuade the reluctant MS to join them in developing a particular policy field. If there is no conflict, no debate will follow and few actions will be initiated. The same applies to the national level, where the more reluctant parties will have to be convinced of the importance of a potential national priority. In order to get a topic on the national agenda someone needs to be absolutely convinced of its importance and lobby for more support.

At EU level:

- The implementation at EU level can only be successful where the implementation at MS level is trustworthy.
- The involved countries are at different stages in their development of NQFs and EOF referencing reports. They feel the need to provide critical feedback, to support other MS and to stimulate each other while implementing the recommendation. Evidence was found that MS have adjusted their referencing reports, as a result of pressure from other MS.
- Until now, no deep conflicts have occurred, but potential hazards endanger the implementation (e.g. positioning the school leaving certificate either at level 4 or 5, but also the progress made against the second deadline). The future should tell how the OMC will react to these potential conflicts and whether it proves resilient.
- The European Commission and Cedefop, play an important facilitating role avoiding potential conflicts between MS, starting up discussions with MS well in advance and use strategically Peer Learning Activities to discuss potential conflicts at an early stage.

At MS level:

- In general it can be concluded that in countries where the EQF is being used as a reform agenda, conflicts between different stakeholders (e.g. between educational sectors, between the education sector and employers) are more pressing than in countries where the EQF is implemented more technically, since it is not influencing established systems or frameworks in place.
- In some countries the prior technical implementation leads to debates and conflicts calling for more severe transformations of education systems on the long run.

Outcomes of the EQF for lifelong learning

In literature on qualifications frameworks, critical assessments can be found on the impact of qualifications frameworks. As a result some authors claim that the evidence base for the implementation of qualifications frameworks is lacking. Others mention that the shift to learning outcomes might destabilise existing education structures and distract attention to more pressing national educational issues (such as early school leaving). Although, these accounts are valued as counterpoint for 'sheer policy-believing', the hard evidence that

qualifications frameworks will not lead to impact is as questionable as the hard evidence that qualifications frameworks will lead to impact. For providing a clear and reasonable view on the outcomes one first needs to define the impact categories qualifications frameworks are aiming at. Secondly, one should be realistic on what can reasonably be measured and concluded given the time span of the implementation. To gain a balanced judgement of outcomes of the implementation of the EQF recommendation, a distinction should be made between three categories of outcome: output, results and impact.

- It can be concluded that the **output** of the whole EQF project until now is satisfactory for most stakeholders involved and is progressing according to plan. The 2008 Recommendation and the preparatory work triggered a lot of activities in the MS and at European level which are clearly related to the final objectives of the Recommendation. A serious flaw is that it is questionable whether the second step in referencing will be finalised.
- The **results** of the EQF project, defined as increasing transparency and stakeholder involvement, almost four years after the publication of the Recommendation are promising, but at this point insufficient for realising the final objectives improving workers' and learners' mobility and increasing lifelong learning. Fields on which insufficient progress has been made concern the implementation of the learning outcome approach, stakeholder involvement, establishment of quality assurance systems, and the further establishment of validation procedures for non-formal and informal learning, at national level.
- The **impact** on the main objectives of the EQF, namely increased lifelong learning and workers' and learners' mobility, cannot be made sufficiently visible at this moment. In the first place, it is still (almost 4 years after the Recommendation) relatively early to see the impact and only anecdotic evidence exists, such as countries where qualifications frameworks facilitate validation of prior learning and making national systems comparable. Secondly, due to lack of progress in relation to the envisaged results, it remains questionable whether full impact will be reached in short term.

Conclusions

Implementing the EQF Recommendation is a prestigious, comprehensive and challenging EU wide project, requiring a lot of commitment of stakeholders at EU and national level. Analysing the relevance, implementation and first outcomes of this project, one can conclude that the implementation of the EQF recommendation can be considered to be an example of a successful OMC.

Nevertheless, **the following critical conclusions** can be drawn mentioning some serious challenges and technical issues that could be a threat to the full and trustworthy implementation of the EQF Recommendation.

- There is **no explicit link between the EQF and the EU targets** that are established within the framework of EU2020 and ET2020. It needs to be better explained how the EQF will contribute to reaching these targets (e.g. on participation in lifelong learning).
- There is a lack of **involvement of other DGs** which should have a natural stake in the implementation of the EQF (i.e. DG EMPL and DG MARKT). This could be further developed to increase the labour market orientation of the EQF.
- Differences existed between MS with regard to the point of departure. Some of the MS already had long-established frameworks, while others still had to discuss and implement the basic principles. This **difference in the initial stages influenced progress made with regard to the implementation** of the Recommendation on the EQF and to set up NQFs.

- There is clearly a **discrepancy** between the five level system based on input variables of the **Professional qualifications Directive 2005/36** on the recognition of professional qualifications and the **EQF** outcome based system of eight levels. Alignment between the two systems is recommended.
- Difficulties are encountered by some MS in the **referencing process (first deadline on referencing national systems to EQF levels)**. These difficulties mainly relate to:
 - Justifying the link between level descriptors of the national system/framework and the EQF.
 - Limited progress in applying the learning outcomes approach.
 - Positioning certain qualifications within NQF and subsequently referencing them to the EQF (a striking example is the discussion on how to place school leaving certificate giving access to higher education).
 - There is a lack of established validation procedures for non-formal and informal learning.
 - Disputes between VET and HE sector, hampering permeability and the reduction of the traditional barriers between the two subsystems
 - The way the provision of learning outside the formal sector (non-formal and in formal learning) is included and linked to the national frameworks.
 - Insufficient attention to underpin qualifications frameworks and systems with transparent procedures for assuring the quality attuned to the learning outcome approach.
- It appears difficult **to engage stakeholders** outside the formal education sector and, more specifically, final beneficiaries (social partners and citizens). A major challenge is to have the **labour market side involved**, since there is a lack of interest from the employers' side who in some countries regard the EQF/NQF as not relevant for them. This creates a serious threat to the dialogue between education and labour market side, the pursued mutual ownership of NQFs and to the role these frameworks are envisaged to play in relation to the labour market.
- Many countries, including those that finalised their referencing report, have not even started working on procedures to guarantee that a reference to the appropriate EQF level will be included on each new qualification and Europass document (**second deadline**).
- The **Referencing of international qualifications** is in a way a test case on how comparable NQFs are. The key question is whether qualifications, without coordinated actions, would be positioned at the same EQF levels by all countries.

As a consequence of all of the above mentioned issues, the full and trustworthy implementation of the EQF could be endangered by a lack of **mutual trust**. The difference in how countries deal with the implementation could harm the trust of MS in the EQF implementation in other countries than their own. To increase the mutual trust, it is of the highest priority to have all stakeholders involved in the implementation. This can only fully be done by implementing the **second step in the referencing process**: indicating the level of the EQF on each new qualification. The momentum for developing qualifications frameworks is there, but will soon be lost when the discussions only involve high level policy makers and well informed stakeholders and not the broader public. Therefore, completing the second step of referencing, initiating ground-level practical debates on the function and functioning of the EQF should be the primary objective in the coming year

towards April 2013. It is by this second step that it will be possible for the EQF to start to make an impact, since only then it will be seen, used and discussed by the end-users, creating a 'flywheel' effect and boosting the results and impact of the EQF.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for further action can be presented to various stakeholders.

To the European Parliament, the European Commission and other European level institutions:

- It is recommended to **continue the mandate** of the EQF AG after April 2013, given the relevance of the EQF implementation for the future European labour market and education system; the global tendency to develop qualifications frameworks; the efforts made at European and MS level to build mutual trust in each other's national qualifications framework or system; and finally the output already generated and preventing that the process will come to a standstill.
- It is recommended that in the new period the EQF should become less an education agenda and **more a labour market driven agenda**, including a more intense dialogue between education and labour market stakeholders. This will not happen overnight, but in the remainder of the current period, substantial progress needs to be made in relation to the second step in referencing and mitigating the main barriers.
- The evaluation, which the EC has to conduct on the period 2008-2013 will have to include both **a retrospective, but even more importantly a prospective view** on how the EQF can be improved in its design and implementation to better relate to the labour market side and to have a higher impact on the ground.
- It is recommended to **better clarify how the EQF contributes to the main objectives of EU2020 and ET2020** (lifelong learning and workers' and learners' mobility), by more clearly defining intermediary objective (such as implementing the learning outcome approach, developing quality systems, and developing validation procedures for non-formal and informal learning).
- It is recommended at EU level to **increase the involvement of other DGs** (DG EMPL and DG MARKT) to support the shift from an educational agenda towards a more labour market driven agenda.
- It is recommended to **further align European tools** and initiatives and in particular remove discrepancies between the five level system based on input variables of the Professional qualifications Directive 2005/36 on the recognition of professional qualifications and the EQF outcome based system of eight levels.

To the EQF AG and the Member States:

- It is recommended to **increase the focus on the second stage of referencing** (indicating the appropriate EQF level on each new qualification, certificate and Europass document).
- It is recommended to agree on **time lines** related to the second stage of referencing, draw up and distribute **guidelines** and finally **share experiences and good practices in relation to the second stage**.

- It is recommended to **further develop and implement the learning outcome approach and appropriate validation procedures for non-formal and informal learning**.
- It is recommended to increase the focus on setting up **quality assurance systems** for all educational sectors, taking into account the learning outcome approach towards qualifications.

To Member States and stakeholders at MS level:

- It is recommended to increase **the involvement of the labour market stakeholders** to raise commitment, to create a feeling of ownership of the NQF/EQF from final beneficiaries (citizens, workers and employers) and finally, to stimulate the dialogue between education and labour market side stakeholders.
- It is recommended to **work on the second stage of referencing**: indicating the level of the EQF on each new qualification, and to initiate **ground-level practical debates** on the function and functioning of the EQF.
- It is recommended to increase **transparency how the levels are linked for final beneficiaries**, by better communicating the EQF to final beneficiaries.
- It is recommended to further build **learning outcome based quality assurance systems for all education sectors** (investigating the possibility for one QA system).
- It is recommended to further **work on validation of non formal and informal learning**, and to position learning outside the formal education sector in the NQF.