



European
Commission

Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the **EQF** Update 2013

European Qualifications Framework Series: [Note 5](#)

This EQF Note has been made possible by individuals from European many countries and many different institutions:

- members of the EQF Advisory Group and representatives of EQF National Coordination Points, who, through their various examples and active and constructive discussions identified the main issues to be addressed by the Note;
- participants in peer learning activities in Tallinn (September 2011), Prague (February 2012) and Brussels (April 2012), shared their insights;
- Mike Coles, external expert and Karin Luomi Messerer (3s) who drafted the text;
- Jens Bjørnåvold and Slava Grm-Pevac (Cedefop), who helped clarifying issues
- Anita Krémó (European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture), who coordinated inputs to the Note.

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2013

ISBN 978-92-79-26563-1

doi:10.2766/40015

Pictures: © European Commission

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Printed in Belgium

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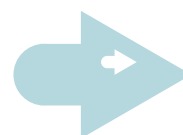
Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the **EQF** Update 2013

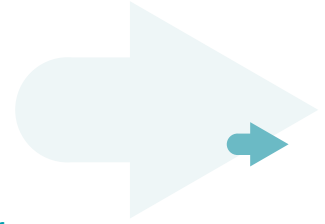


European Qualifications Framework Series: [Note 5](#)

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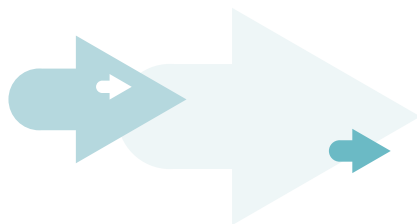
Foreword

This Note is part of the European Qualifications Framework Series, which is written for those involved in the implementation of the EQF. The Note updates the discussion points in Note 3, which was written on the basis of the first four referencing reports. By April 2012, thirteen countries have presented referencing reports to the EQF Advisory Group, and these reports and the discussions of them at meetings of the EQF Advisory Group have been used to prepare this 2nd updated, edition of the Note.

The Recommendation of the Council and the European Parliament on the establishment of the EQF invites Member States *'to relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF by referencing their national qualifications levels to the relevant levels of the EQF, and where appropriate, developing national qualifications frameworks in accordance with national legislation and practise'* ⁽¹⁾.

The success of the EQF will depend on the transparency of these national referencing processes and their results, and the trust these generate among stakeholders inside and outside the country. Therefore, it is critically important to share common principles in the referencing processes across Europe, and, at the same time, to understand the rational of various methodologies and possible interpretations of the ten criteria and procedures for the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF, which were agreed by the EQF Advisory Group in 2008 ⁽²⁾.

The particular purpose of this Note is to support further discussions and decisions on the processes and methodologies of referencing national qualifications levels to the levels of the EQF and on presenting the results of the referencing process.



(1)
Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning in Official Journal of the European Union 2008/C 111/01. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>

(2)
Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf

Introduction

The success of the EQF as a tool for transparency and mobility depends on the ways countries reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF level descriptors. High levels of trust in the EQF and realistic understandings of national qualifications levels will come from an open and rigorous referencing process that reflects the collective view of national stakeholders. Trust and realistic understanding will also depend on good communication of the outcome of the referencing process inside and outside the country. Referencing processes that are hard to understand or disguise problematic areas or are based on weak engagement of stakeholders will destroy trust in the EQF as a translation device. The referencing process is, therefore, critically important.

What is referencing to the EQF?

Referencing is the process that results in the establishment of a relationship between the levels of national qualifications, usually defined in terms of a national qualifications framework, and the levels of the EQF. Through this process, national authorities responsible for qualifications systems, in cooperation with stakeholders responsible for developing and using qualifications, define the correspondence between the national qualifications system and the eight levels of the EQF.

Trust is dependent on the technical reliability of learning outcomes at national level and transparent procedures used in referencing. However, it is also dependent on a consensus amongst stakeholders and the way the consensus is rooted in custom and practice. Thus the referencing process embraces both objectivity and consensus as elements of trust.

The basis of this Note

This Note has been written on the basis of the experience of the first set of thirteen countries to present to the EQF Advisory Group the national referencing process and its outcomes⁽³⁾ (Belgium-Flanders, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Malta, Portugal and the United Kingdom⁽⁴⁾). It is also based on discussions in the EQF Advisory Group, meetings of the EQF National Coordination Points, peer learning activities based on the Learning Outcomes Group⁽⁵⁾ and the proceedings of the EQF conference in Budapest in May 2011).

(3)
The referencing reports of these countries are available at the EQF portal: http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm

(4)
The referencing of the United Kingdom encompasses the referencing of three qualifications frameworks: England and Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

(5)
This group is a sub-group to the EQF Advisory Group.



Purpose of this Note

This updated Note on EQF referencing aims to continue to support national decisions and international exchanges on the referencing process in countries yet to complete the referencing process and for those aiming at revisiting their referencing process or report. The aim is to present the current 'state of the art' of the referencing process and reflect the consensus reached in discussions of the EQF Advisory Group. The Note provides advice based on experiences of other countries, it gives sources of information, clarifies some concepts related to the EQF referencing and outlines answers to common questions. It also proposes certain issues to be considered when carrying out the referencing.

This Note does not aim to prescribe any processes or methods for the referencing process beyond the ten referencing criteria adopted by the EQF Advisory Group ([see chapter 4](#)). It acknowledges that the countries that are currently carrying out their own referencing processes will develop their own fit-for-purpose procedures.

The Note underlines the benefits the referencing process can have for the national qualifications systems being referenced. So far the referencing process has proven to be helpful to those countries that have experienced the process. It has made it easier for the stakeholders involved to examine the national qualifications systems from the point of view of an outsider. This perspective has, in some cases, revealed some hidden issues. As a consequence of this some countries have undertaken new action to improve their national system. For example the French report points out:

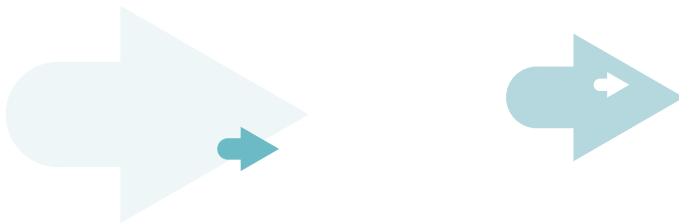
Although it was often very difficult to draw a line between the work linked to referencing and that to be carried out to create a new list (NQF), the analyses made concerning the national descriptors and their comparison with the EQF descriptors led to reflections and critical analyses at a national level (that are not mentioned in the referencing report), but will be taken into account to ensure that the descriptors of the future French NQF are as coherent and transparent as possible as compared with the descriptors in the European framework.

The primary audience for this Note comprises members of national NQF or EQF steering groups, EQF National Coordination Points and national policy advisers in the field of education, training and qualifications.

Structure of the Note

The document is structured into two parts:

- Part one introduces the EQF and considers the main policy issues related to the referencing of qualifications systems to the EQF.
- Part two provides a technical analysis of referencing based on the practice in the countries that have referenced qualifications systems to the EQF. There are many examples provided to illustrate issues and solutions that are drawn directly from referencing reports.



Part one

1 The EQF

The EQF is a translation device that can broaden the understanding of national qualifications systems of participating countries, especially for people from outside of these countries. Added transparency is possible when the learning outcomes approach is adopted as the basis for comparison of qualifications systems with one another and with the EQF.

The EQF is a tool for lifelong learning

The EQF aims to support lifelong learning and in particular lifelong recognition of learning. Thanks to the capacity of the EQF to capture all kinds and levels of qualifications, regardless of where learning has taken place, it is able to support national lifelong learning policies. It also does this by encouraging, inter alia, the refinement of such things as:

- the use of learning outcomes;
- the need for systematic and transparent processes of quality assurance;
- the facilitation of validation of non formal and informal learning; and
- the development of NQFs and credit transfer systems.

All of these are critically important for lifelong learning. The EQF has been particularly influential in the development of national qualifications frameworks⁽⁶⁾. These show the permeability between different strands of education and training and the vertical and horizontal links between qualifications. Indeed most of the NQFs developed in the participating countries have been comprehensive frameworks covering all education sub-systems and providing the possibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. This support for permeability between education sub-systems is increasingly necessary in situations where people's trajectories (employment, learning or personal) are often subject to change and where access to professions, programmes or status requires proof of prior achievement.

For lifelong learning to gather pace it is necessary that the EQF referencing process itself leads towards effective national practices linked to lifelong learning, such as the referencing of all qualification levels concurrently to the EQF and the Qualifications Frameworks for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)⁽⁷⁾, or the description of all qualifications in terms of their learning outcomes which can be more or less independent of the routes to learning or the traditional institutions. This means the referencing report needs to make clear statement about the focus on lifelong learning and the means of achieving more of it.

(6) The development of NQFs in Europe: October 2012, Cedefop, Thessaloniki. See <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19313.aspx>

(7) See in [chapter 3](#) Referencing to the EQF



In Portugal, the aim to use the EQF and the corresponding NQF as an instrument of reference for comparing the qualification levels of the different qualifications systems from the perspective of lifelong learning is clearly expressed in the referencing report.

It is crucial that [the] classifications framework creates the conditions for:

(1) a strengthening of the integration of education and training and the permeability between these, (2) a focus on learning outcomes – an explicit objective of the National Qualifications Catalogue, (3) the classification of learning acquired through experience and (4) an easier and clearer communication of the education and training system.

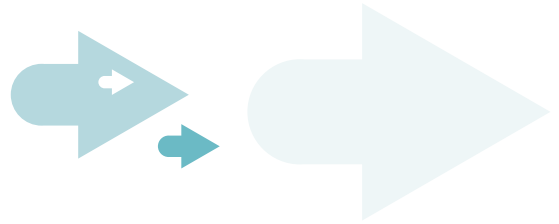
The EQF is a metaframework that can, in principle, include a reference level for all qualifications and all learning whatever route the learning takes. In a successful single European area of education and training as well as in the single labour market, where people move freely across borders, all national and employment sector qualifications should be acceptable for recognition in the Member States as this would support mobility. The EQF and, more importantly, its basis in using learning outcomes, is therefore a force for open, inclusive and transparent consideration of qualifications.

The EQF and mobility of people

The EQF makes it possible to compare qualifications levels in national qualifications systems of the countries that participate in the Education and Training 2020 process. Qualifications systems are always complex and are generally difficult to understand by people who wish to work or study in countries other than their own. Nevertheless, learners who would like to start or continue further studies in another country would like to have their skills and competences and qualifications recognised. The EQF provides a useful reference for those practitioners who work on the recognition of qualifications in educational and training institutions to better understand the level of competences and qualifications of potential candidates, in particular when EQF levels are indicated in certificates, diplomas and Europass documents.

The same is true for employers who wish to treat the single European labour market as a homogeneous territory for investment. The EQF is also a communication tool for business sectors and companies at European level. Employers see value in describing requirements and the skills levels of employees in terms of learning outcomes and the levels of the EQF.

For example, the European Hairdressing sector is impacted by fashion and the evolution of various techniques (new chemical components, new products, new material) that are constantly evolving. Therefore the Social Partners for Personal Services (Hairdressing and Cosmetics) have engaged in several initiatives to provide adapted



lifelong learning schemes to their sector. Amongst these actions is the development of the European Hairdressing Certificate. Stakeholders in this sector also decided to link their sectoral training schemes to the EQF to ensure its full adaptability to national contexts, the transparency of its content and the necessary flexibility to new adaptations or further developments⁽⁸⁾.

There are many factors that contribute to the value of a qualification for a particular purpose but the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence) is a significant factor to be considered by those who evaluate qualifications. NQFs support the comparability of qualifications at national level in terms of level of learning outcomes achieved; while, by providing a common metric for EU countries it might be expected that the EQF will provide an initial benchmark for comparing qualifications at European level, including providing support for the assessment of qualifications in the process of recognition of qualifications in the EU and beyond. Such kind of use of the EQF is already envisaged in some countries, for example in Denmark:

Legislation from 2001 in Denmark creates a coherent framework for foreign qualifications recognition be it for labour market or academic purposes. The Act gives all foreigners the right to undergo a qualifications recognition procedure and it includes an assessment of the level of foreign qualifications compared to the levels of the Danish qualification system. Clearly since the Danish qualifications Framework is now referenced to the EQF the recognition of foreign qualifications from other countries that have completed the referencing process is made easier⁽⁹⁾.

European frameworks and national frameworks

The EQF does not concern itself with the ways in which countries structure and prioritise their education and training policies, structures and institutions. It is a metaframework that is a reference point for these national systems and is based on different principles and functions than national qualifications frameworks. Similarly the QF-EHEA is a set of generalised statements about levels of qualifications in the wide range of countries that have engaged with the Bologna process⁽¹⁰⁾.

The national frameworks (NQFs) covering the education and training sectors have a different and more extensive set of detailed principles and procedures than the metaframeworks to which, through referencing and self-certification processes they are to be related. The differences between the two types of frameworks – NQFs and the metaframeworks are clarified in table 1 below.

(8)
Guidelines and recommendations on how to use the EQF in this sector have been prepared by the EQF project EQF-Hair. <http://www.dfkf.dk/EQF-Hair.aspx>

(9)
From: Translation of Consolidation Act no. 371 of 13 April 2005 (Danish Act in effect) Assessment of Foreign Qualifications etc. (Consolidation) Act

(10)
A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

Table 1: Comparing national qualifications levels and levels in the EQF and the QF-EHEA⁽¹¹⁾

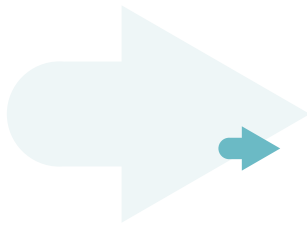
Differences between the types of framework	National qualifications levels	EQF levels	QF-EHEA levels
Main function:	to act as a benchmark for the level of learning recognised in the national qualifications system or the NQF, and when relevant, an indication of volume and type of learning	to act as a benchmark for the level of any learning recognised in a qualification in an NQF linked to the EQF	to act as a benchmark for the level of learning recognised in qualifications that represent the three cycles of the Bologna process and that are awarded by a higher education institution
Developed by:	regional bodies, national agencies and education and training bodies	EU Member States acting jointly	Higher education communities acting jointly under the Bologna process
Sensitive to:	local, regional and national priorities (e.g. levels of literacy, labour market needs)	collective priorities for transparency of qualifications systems across countries (e.g. establishment of free movement of citizens, single European labour market)	collective priorities for harmonisation of higher education across countries (e.g. establishing a common understanding of the outcomes of the three cycles of higher education)
Currency/value depends on:	factors within national context	the level of trust between international users	common understandings between higher education communities
Quality is guaranteed by:	the practices of national bodies and learning institutions	the common application of the ten referencing criteria and procedures and the robustness of the referencing process linking national and EQF levels	the common application of European level tools such as European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education
Levels are defined by reference to:	national benchmarks which are embedded in different specific learning contexts, e.g. school education, work or higher education	general progression in learning across all contexts across all countries	general progression in learning in higher education provision

Qualifications are not directly referenced to the EQF

There are no qualifications directly referenced to the EQF and there is no process envisaged to make this a possibility. Only national qualifications systems are formally linked to the EQF through the referencing process. For any specific qualification, the national qualifications system is the only concrete point of reference. In other words, a specific qualification will only be given an EQF level when the qualification has an agreed level in the national system and this system has been officially referenced to the EQF⁽¹²⁾. If the formal link between the qualification and a national system is missing, there is currently no procedure for linking the qualification to the EQF.

(11)
Adapted from Bjornavold, Jens and Coles, Mike (2008) *Governing education and training; the case of qualifications frameworks*, *European Journal of vocational training*, n°42-43, CEDEFOP

(12)
Commonly taken to mean when national authorities and stakeholders have prepared a report that explains the results of this referencing and it is presented to the EQF Advisory Group.



These considerations on the nature of the EQF and how it operates show that the EQF referencing process is a serious challenge. It attempts to establish a link between qualifications levels related to real qualifications in countries and the rather abstract generalisation that is the EQF.

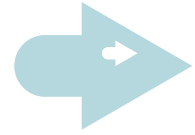
The linkage of the international qualifications⁽¹³⁾ developed by global companies (for commercial advantage), sectoral and professional bodies (for regulatory power and market position), and international authorities (for the safe and efficient operation of systems such as transport, health and communications) to NQFs and the EQF is an important issue. The growth in these qualifications is part of a globalising trend in education, training and qualifications systems. In some countries, there are significant negotiations taking place with 'owners' of these qualifications, and procedures are being developed to allow the qualifications to align with NQFs or be part of NQFs. In the EQF Advisory Group, which coordinates the implementation of the EQF at European level, discussions are on-going on how such links with NQFs should be made in order to ensure that consistent and coordinated approaches are followed at national level.

Referencing as the basis for national reforms

It is becoming more common for countries to see the referencing process as enabling reflection on their qualifications as well as education and training system. As the referencing process is concerned with improving transparency of qualifications systems, it can provide evidence for the need for change in the education, training and qualifications system. Many of the referencing reports that have been written acknowledge the support the referencing process has given to national developments in education and training systems.

(13)

International qualification is not a precise term, these qualifications can include stateless qualifications (owned and operated outside the jurisdiction of a country), transnational qualifications (which may be owned or not by a country but which are used across the world), professional qualifications (which are defined and regulated by professional bodies that transcend national boundaries) and sectoral qualifications (that define qualification standards in a business sector regardless of the country).



2 Diversity of qualifications systems

National qualifications systems always appear to be complex when viewed from outside the country. There is often a mix of different stakeholders' responsibilities; varied governance arrangements, multiple institutions (each with its own role and responsibility), and sub-systems that can be linked to others or are almost separate from the others. These differences reflect the fact that qualifications are deeply embedded in national and regional economies, society and cultures.

All participating countries have agreed that the referencing process is best achieved through a national qualifications framework (NQF). The NQF levels usually embrace many qualifications and several sub-systems: with an NQF in place, national referencing can be achieved by referencing each NQF level to an EQF level. When an NQF is developed care is taken to ensure that it reflects the ways qualifications are used and valued in the country⁽¹⁴⁾. Obviously technical specification of the learning (included in the qualification) is taken into account as are a range of social factors to do with equivalencies between qualifications and how they interface with other national arrangements such as licences to work in the labour market. In an ideal situation the NQF is a representation of all of these factors and stakeholders feel they can support the NQF classification and its associated functions. The NQF is, therefore, a simplification of the complex arrangements in a national qualifications system.

Linking the NQF to the EQF levels needs to take account of the unique set of national arrangements embodied in the NQF. Any over-simplification at this stage in the referencing process will undermine stakeholder confidence that the NQF is truly reflected in the proposal for the referencing of the NQF to the EQF. People viewing from the outside of the country, from the perspective of the EQF, need to be confident that the NQF captures as much of the national qualifications system as possible in its structure.

The Cedefop survey of NQFs⁽¹⁵⁾ shows that most countries are aiming to establish comprehensive NQFs that cover all education sectors. Other considerations that are important to countries is that the NQF has strong support from stakeholders, use learning outcomes for level descriptors, facilitate the validation of non formal and informal learning and uses and supports a good quality assurance system.

(14)

Bjornavold, Jens and Coles, Mike for the European Commission (2010) EQF Note 2: Added value of National Qualifications Frameworks in implementing the EQF. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note2_en.pdf

(15)

The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe, October 2011, Cedefop, Thessaloniki. See <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19313.aspx>

Qualifications systems across the world

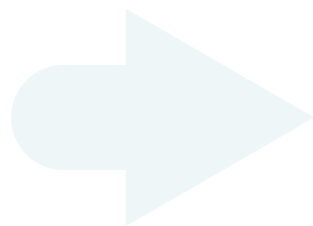
There are now qualifications framework developments in over 120⁽¹⁶⁾ countries in the world. Each of these will vary with frameworks having different purposes, structures and governance procedures. These frameworks are a useful first step in supporting mobility of people around the world since the framework levels are explicit and can be compared. Metaframeworks such as the EQF can help link national qualifications frameworks in a region and are therefore also helpful in terms of mobility. There are already discussions between European countries and countries from other regions to explore how NQFs can be used to support mobility and so it is useful to explore how the EQF can act as a common European reference to support comparison and recognition between Europe and other regions. The EU–Australia study⁽¹⁷⁾ is an example of this exploratory activity.

(16)

See: Transnational Qualifications Frameworks, 2010, European Training Foundation, Torino, p7. [http://www.etf.europa.eu/webatt.nsf/0/720E67F5F1CC3E1DC125791A0038E688/\\$file/Transnational%20Qualifications%20frameworks.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/webatt.nsf/0/720E67F5F1CC3E1DC125791A0038E688/$file/Transnational%20Qualifications%20frameworks.pdf)

(17)

Study on the (potential) role of qualifications frameworks in supporting mobility of workers and learners. European Commission and Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Joint EU-Australia Study. http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/australia_en.pdf



3 Referencing to the EQF

The national referencing process is an autonomous national process where the relevant national stakeholders and authorities agree on the appropriate link between national qualifications levels and the EQF levels.

Following the approval of the national referencing reports by the national authorities and stakeholders, the report of each country is presented to the EQF Advisory Group. The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate in a transparent way to other countries how the country in question has referred its qualifications levels to the EQF, and how the ten referencing criteria and procedures are met. In particular, the presentation to the EQF Advisory Group provides information in two main areas.

1. The scope of the framework (VET, general education, HE, qualifications outside the formal system), the criteria and procedures used for inclusion of qualifications in the framework and how learning outcomes are understood and used in the framework;
2. The referencing of NQF levels to the EQF levels including the methodologies used to link NQF levels to the EQF levels, stakeholders' involvement in the referencing process (including quality assurance bodies), the selection and involvement of international experts and particular challenges and strengths in the referencing process.

The differences in qualifications systems mean that there can be no single model for the referencing process. Each country has educational traditions, policy priorities and institutional differences that lead to a unique approach to referencing. However, this should not imply that there is no commonality in the implementation processes that have been carried out so far. Through discussions in the EQF Advisory Group, countries have agreed that mutual trust will be optimised if countries openly discuss processes and outcomes of the referencing process and show, inter alia, how stakeholders are involved, learning outcomes are used, international experts have participated and quality assurance processes are supported.



The approach to referencing

Based on the reports already presented, there is a general pattern for managing the referencing process:

1. Setting up the bodies that will manage the referencing process.
2. A proposal for the level-to-level linkages between the NQF and the EQF is made.
3. National consultation takes place on the basis of the proposal.
4. A referencing report is written that takes into account the national consultation and the views of international experts.
5. The relevant responsible bodies endorse the referencing report.
6. The referencing report is presented to the EQF Advisory Group and a discussion follows.
7. If relevant, clarifications and further evidence is provided to questions and comments made by the EQF Advisory Group.
8. If changes in the NQF and relationship between the NQF and the EQF occur, the report is updated and the EQF Advisory Group informed.

A checklist for managers of the referencing process is included in [chapter 9](#).

Referencing to the two European metaframeworks

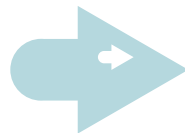
The self-certification process (QF-EHEA) and the referencing to the EQF are now often taking place concurrently (for example, this has been the case in Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands and Portugal,). The criteria and processes for referencing to the EQF or self-certification to the QF-EHEA are very similar (the criteria for self-certification were used as a basis for developing the ten EQF referencing criteria and procedures)⁽¹⁸⁾. This concurrent referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA is seen by the EQF Advisory Group as an approach that is likely to lead to greater coherence and synergy between higher education and other routes to learning. The single referencing report, with sections dedicated to the referencing/self-certification to each European framework, has been seen by the EQF Advisory Group as a signal of transparency and coordination between different segments of education and training.

However, there can be some important differences in the processes, for example:

- In the case of the QF-EHEA, the objective is to show that the national/institutional qualifications structure matches that of the European framework. In broad terms to show harmonisation with the European framework. In the case of the EQF, the national system of qualifications is not expected to change to match the EQF, but it must be shown how it relates to the EQF.

(18)

For discussion on the two metaframeworks see Cedefop (2010) *Linking credit systems and qualifications frameworks*; chapter two and eight. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5505_en.pdf



- In the case of the QF-EHEA, the self-certification process is based on an assumption that once self-certified, the link between the national levels of qualifications should be taken as robust and proven. For someone in another country to doubt the linkage (for recognition purposes) they would be required to show substantial difference in what they perceive a qualification to stand for and what is stated in the self-certification report. In the case of the EQF, the burden of proof lies with the reporting country, since it needs to prove best-fit between a national level and an EQF level. In practice, there may not be so distinct approaches since *substantial difference* and *best fit* both aim to arrive at a consensus about the value of a qualification or level against one of the European frameworks.
- The reporting of the referencing and the self-certification process may be kept separate (as it is the case, for example, in the UK) or the reporting can be combined in one document with separate sections for each process (for examples, the Estonian report follows this pattern). The EQF Advisory Group sees a single report presenting the results of the EQF referencing process and the self-certification process as a tool for increased transparency indicating that the processes have been closely coordinated and agreed by stakeholders.

In relation to the last point, the Irish conference of April 2010⁽¹⁹⁾ on NQFs and overarching European frameworks brought together Bologna experts and those working with the EQF. The conclusion of the conference included a number of statements (see Box 1) that underline the need for coordinated activities in relation to the two European frameworks and the centrality of NQFs in achieving this.

Box 1: Abstract from the conclusions of the Dublin conference on NQFs and overarching European frameworks (April 2010)

For qualifications frameworks to realise their full potential, there is a need for greater cohesion. To achieve this, opportunities should be harnessed to bring together the communities involved in national qualifications frameworks (for vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE) or lifelong learning), sectoral qualifications and recognition. Ultimately, we are all trying to achieve the same objectives, but in different ways: we want individuals to have their learning recognised and be able to move with that learning between education and training sectors and between countries. The multiplicity of ways we are going about this, both at a European and a national level, whilst in itself desirable, requires effective communication and measures to address any difficulties and confusions that arise.

Coherence between the two metaframeworks should be ensured at national level, including through coordinated self-certifications. Individual states and the relevant authorities have a prerogative to decide the manner of implementing

(19)

See http://www.nqai.ie/publications_by_topic.html#fi for a report of the conference.

the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna Framework') and associated reforms and European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL). It is imperative, however, if frameworks are to have any effect, that national frameworks meet national challenges for the development of education and training systems.

Source: Higher Education Authority and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2010)

Part two

4 The ten criteria and procedures for the referencing process

The EQF Advisory Group has endorsed ten criteria⁽²⁰⁾ to guide the referencing process so that the best conditions for mutual trust can develop. The criteria have proven to be a useful way to structure the referencing reports and have become a core component of these reports.

The discussions of the EQF Advisory Group and referencing reports continue to clarify the understanding of the ten criteria. In the text that follows each criterion is examined from the viewpoint of the application in the countries that have already referenced to the EQF.

Criterion 1

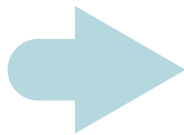
The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.

When it comes to national qualifications systems, different countries have different institutional structures. In the referencing process, it is necessary to take into account all of the bodies that have a legitimate role in the referencing process and to clarify (for international readers) their roles. Bodies with these types of functions are generally considered as having such legitimate role:

- those responsible for governing the processes through which nationally recognised qualifications are designed and awarded;
- those responsible for national education standards, curricula development or curricula design;
- those in charge of quality assurance in relation to design and award of nationally recognised qualifications;
- those managing and maintaining a qualifications framework (if in existence);
- those responsible for the recognition of foreign qualifications and providing information on national qualifications;
- representatives of institutions awarding qualifications;
- representatives of those using qualifications (employers, learners); and
- EQF National Coordination Point (NCP).

(20)

The 'Criteria and procedures for the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF' (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf) were adopted by the EQF Advisory Group in March 2009



With regard to the referencing process, some bodies such as ministries of education or ministries of labour offer political leadership, designated agencies may be responsible for managing the process. Other bodies may have an advisory and consultative role and will bring in a range of stakeholder perspectives to the discussions.

In the EQF Recommendation countries implementing the EQF are invited to designate NCPs that will coordinate the referencing process. The NCPs take many forms some take a leading role and others are coordinators of the referencing process.

NCPs based in ministries and qualifications agencies are not the only relevant bodies for the referencing process. If this position were adopted it would miss the opportunity of widening the involvement of other stakeholder groups in referencing such as social partners, bodies representing business sectors with high levels of mobility of employees, learning providers and learners themselves. For this reason the word *relevant* in the criterion should be seen as an opportunity to broaden the ownership of the referencing process even if the responsibility for national qualifications remains firmly with a single ministry. The information on stakeholders in [chapter 5](#) may be helpful here.

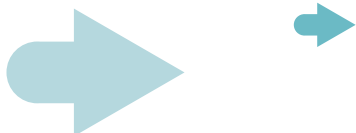
Criterion 2

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.

For a *clear and demonstrable link* to be established there needs to be an understanding of EQF levels and NQF levels and how they relate. When this understanding is established the procedure for matching levels needs to be described: this procedure should be robust and transparent, probably including a careful application of a 'best-fit' process (see [chapter 5](#)).

The EQF levels need to be appreciated as a generalised model of learning that may in some circumstances appear to be limited – for example, the EQF level descriptors do not make reference to personal qualities or key competences. NQF level descriptors might include additional or other categories than the three descriptors of the EQF: knowledge, skills, and competence.

For example, the referencing report from the Netherlands opens up the category of 'skills' in the NLQF to include separate descriptors for five areas of skills.



- *Applied knowledge*: reproduce, analyse, integrate, evaluate, combine and apply knowledge in a profession or knowledge domain.
- *Problem solving skills*: recognise or distinguish and solve problems.
- *Learning and development skills*: personal development, autonomously or under supervision.
- *Information skills*: obtain, collect, process, combine, analyse and assess information.
- *Communication skills*: communicate based on in the context relevant conventions.

To gain a good understanding of each EQF level it is necessary to appreciate that a level is probably more than the sum of the three parts that make it up (knowledge, skills and competence). An appreciation of level comes from reading across the descriptors. This creates a narrative meaning – for example – *this is the knowledge (facts, principles and concepts) that can be used with these skills (cognitive and practical) in this kind of context (indicating levels of autonomy and responsibility)* ⁽²¹⁾. The Qualifications and Credit Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland presents such a summary in its first column.

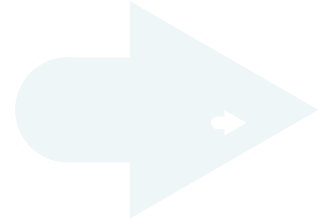
Level	Summary	Knowledge and understanding	Application and action	Autonomy and accountability
Level 1	Achievement at level 1 reflects the ability to use relevant knowledge, skills and procedures to complete routine tasks. It includes responsibility for competing tasks and procedures subject to direction or guidance	Use knowledge of facts, procedures and ideas to complete well-defined, routine tasks Be aware of information relevant to the area of study or work	Complete well-defined routine tasks Use relevant skills and procedures Select and use relevant information Identify whether actions have been effective	Take responsibility for completing tasks and procedures subject to direction or guidance as needed

EQF levels are also in a hierarchy where the content of one level is assumed to include the content of lower levels. Each level descriptor therefore describes the new demands for that particular level of learning. This is also shown in NQFs, for example, in the clear distinction between levels in the NQF for Denmark.

(21)

See also EQF note 1 particularly question 3 on p5.

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf_brochexp_en.pdf

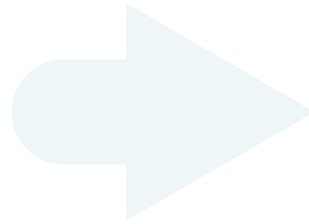


	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Level 1	<p>Must have basic knowledge within general subjects.</p> <p>Must have basic knowledge about natural, cultural, social and political matters.</p>	<p>Must possess basic linguistic, numerical practical and creative skills.</p> <p>Must be able to utilise different basic methods of work.</p> <p>Must be able to evaluate own work.</p> <p>Must be able to present the results of own work.</p>	<p>Must be able to take personal decisions and act in simple, clear situations.</p> <p>Must be able to work independently with pre-defined problems.</p> <p>Must have a desire to learn and be able to enter into partly open learning situations under supervision.</p>
Level 2	<p>Must have basic knowledge in general subjects or specific areas within an occupational area of field of study.</p> <p>Must have understanding of the basic conditions and mechanisms of the labour market.</p>	<p>Must be able to apply fundamental methods and tools for solving simple tasks while observing relevant regulations.</p> <p>Must be able to correct for faults or deviations from a plan or standard.</p> <p>Must be able to present and discuss the results of own work.</p>	<p>Must be able to take personal decisions and act in simple, clear situations.</p> <p>Must be able to undertake a certain amount of responsibility for the development of forms of work and to enter into uncomplicated group processes.</p> <p>Must be able to enter into partly open learning situations and seek guidance and supervision.</p>

Criterion 2 also allows the referencing of national qualifications systems to the EQF. The Czech Republic has chosen this approach:

The Czech Republic has not developed a comprehensive NQF so far and decided to reference its education and qualifications systems to the EQF. It is stated in the referencing report that the existing classification system for qualifications awarded in initial education, the KKO V (Classification of Educational Qualification Types) and the levels in the NSK (National Register of Vocational Qualifications) permit a referencing to the EQF. The referencing procedure chosen simplified the initial phase of the process and permitted a rapid and transparent description and referencing of Czech qualifications. The results of the referencing process are considered as a starting point for further discussion on the need for a comprehensive national qualifications framework which would use common descriptors to describe the levels of all qualifications awarded.

Having established a clear and demonstrable link from each national level to an EQF level, it is important that this link is explained to a wide audience – all assumptions and approximations should be made clear. In demonstrating the link between the levels, referencing reports might usefully contain examples of qualifications that make the link clearer to national and international readers of the report.



Sometimes the linkage between the NQF levels and the EQF levels are derived from technical and political considerations (see [chapter 5](#), sub-chapter on best-fit). The referencing report should make clear the reasoning used to establish the links between levels.

The following questions could be considered when linking national qualifications levels to the EQF level descriptors⁽²²⁾:

- What is the starting point:
 - linking implicit levels of the national qualifications system to the EQF levels or an NQF; if implicit national levels are linked to the EQF: how are they identified?
 - linking an NQF with more or less than eight levels to the EQF; in case an eight level NQF is linked to the EQF levels: what is the basis for this approach (pragmatic reason, fits reality, reform plans)?
- Which approach is used: social or technical approach or both, and what is the reason for this decision; if both approaches are used (and in particular when they are showing different results): how are they balanced?
- Which concrete methodology is used for demonstrating the link?
- What kind of evidence can be provided to support the decisions?

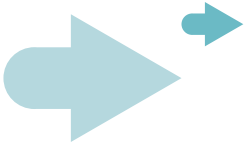
Some more specific guidance on developing this 'demonstrable link' follows in [chapter 5](#) of this Note.

Criterion 3

The national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.

Describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes is part of many current reforms in European countries. All the European level tools for supporting mobility and transparency of qualifications and learning achievements encourage the use of learning outcomes. However, the road to widespread use of learning outcomes is long and varies considerably between different parts of education and training. This means the countries, sectors and institutions that are in transition from learning inputs to using learning outcomes will be referencing to the EQF using national benchmarks or standards that are not yet explicit in terms of learning outcomes. In some cases they will be using benchmarks (level descriptors) based on learning outcomes but without these being fully implemented at the level of qualifications. These countries will therefore need to develop trust by

(22)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011.
EQF Referencing Process and
Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011),
p45. www.EQF-Ref.eu



explaining these implicit standards carefully to users outside the country. The conditions that need to be met in terms of standards and quality assurance will need to be included in referencing reports so that they reassure others that the country is moving towards a generalised use of learning outcomes.

In the Dutch report it is stated that the classification of qualifications in the NLQF will be based on a comparison of the learning outcomes of a qualification with the level descriptions in the NLQF.

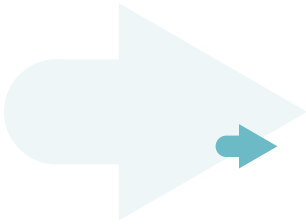
Secondary education is working with core objectives and final terms in which per subject is described what a pupil at the end of the whole educational process needs to know and how to apply this knowledge. Secondary vocational education and training still works with two systems: work based and theoretical based. It is final term-oriented education and competence-based education. Both systems are based on a method in which each qualification has been described on what a student at the end of the journey should know and can do and at what level it must be examined (final terms or qualification dossiers). Accreditation of HE programmes takes place on the basis of learning outcomes descriptions appropriate to the Dublin Descriptors. For classifying qualifications not regulated by ministries learning outcomes descriptions are required as well.

Whilst we are lacking a generalised method for identifying and defining learning outcomes, several interesting approaches have been developed and tested, showing how stepwise identification and definition of learning outcomes is possible. This is explained more fully in EQF Note 4 Using learning outcomes in implementing the EQF ⁽²³⁾.

Some countries have national systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and some have national credit systems. The functions of systems for the validation of non formal and informal learning and the ways credit systems work need to be made explicit in the referencing report as they are important for opening up qualifications systems to national and international users. Of particular importance is to explain the ways validation processes and credit systems are related to the NQF.

In Portugal, both the Adult Education and Training Courses (AET) and the recognition, validation and certification of competences processes (RVCC) are organised on the basis of the basic education and secondary education level key competences standard/referential which are organised in terms of learning outcomes. The competence standards are available in the National Qualifications Catalogue. RVCC processes are run in the New Opportunities Centres and are based on a set of methodological assumptions (i.e. bilan de competence, (auto) biographical approach) that allow adults to show the competences that they have already acquired along their lifelong experience in formal, informal and

(23)
European Commission (2011)
EQF Note 4: Using Learning
Outcomes. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf



non-formal contexts. On this basis, a Learning Reflective Portfolio (LRP) is constructed. This portfolio is guided by a key competences standard (school and/or professional). After the recognition and validation processes, certification takes place in a session with the certification jury, attended by the team that supervised the candidate and an external evaluator accredited by the National Qualifications Agency. If the candidate has shown evidence of the learning outcomes, he/she will be certified and a basic or secondary education diploma will be issued. In the case of a professional RVCC this would be a qualifications certificate (the document that proves and explains the professional competences held).

In the Netherlands, the term Recognition of Prior Learning (APL) is used for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The hallmark of APL in the Netherlands is that the competencies of individuals are compared against a preselected ruler: called a recognized APL standard. All qualifications in vocational education and training and higher education regulated by the ministries can function as an APL recognized standard. In addition to this, sector qualifications can also be recognized.

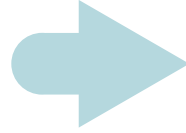
In terms of demonstrating the role of credit within an NQF, Ireland included an explanation of the aims of the credit arrangements for VET qualifications, the derivation of credit points and a summary table of how these relate to the different sized qualifications in the qualifications framework. An extract from the explanatory text follows:

...[the] credit system is designed to complement the NQF and, in particular, the use of award types. The assignment of credit values to major, minor, special purpose and supplemental awards provides greater transparency to the size and shape of the various awards and helps learners, employers and other users to relate awards to each other in a meaningful way. It meets the needs of learners in a lifelong learning context as it puts in place ways of measuring and comparing packages of learning outcomes. In addition, it is also designed with features that are compatible with ECVET...

Criterion 4

The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

Allocating specific qualifications to an NQF level brings meaning to the NQF level for citizens and, through the referencing process, to the EQF level. It is, therefore, critically important for the referencing process that the way a qualification is located at



an NQF level is described in full and examples are provided that illustrate how the rules governing the process are applied. The NQF level of all the major qualifications (or types) needs to be evident in the report.

The referencing report also needs to provide information on the arguments that allows levelling decisions to be made. The following questions have been asked:

- What criteria and procedures are used to make decisions on the inclusion and the level of individual qualifications (whether from the formal education and training sector or outside this) in the NQF?
- What political consideration and technical evidence support such decisions?
- Have specific policies been developed for this purpose?
- What kind of methodology is used for the analysis of the relationship of a qualification with an NQF level?
- Which concrete methodology is used for demonstrating the link?
- What kind of evidence can be provided to support the decisions?

In most countries criteria have been written and agreed that makes the allocation of qualifications to NQF levels systematic (for example, Estonia, France and Ireland). The Estonian referencing report states:

The (NQF) sub-frameworks for general education qualifications, vocational education and training (hereinafter VET) qualifications, higher education qualifications, and professional qualifications contain more detailed and specific descriptors and rules for designing and awarding qualifications.

The principles and the methodologies of the technical analysis of the relationship between the descriptors of individual qualifications and the NQF levels may not only differ from country to country but also may be different in the different education and training subsystems in a country as they follow the logic of the subsystem concerned. Thus, the principle of best-fit may also be interpreted differently. Therefore, the referencing report should also reflect on the following questions:

- How is the principle of best-fit applied when the qualification level of a certain qualification is determined? Is this methodology consistently used across sectors that may use different learning outcomes concepts?

Such information related to criterion 4 has proved to be essential in supporting discussions on the comparability of individual qualifications, including peer learning on increasing synergies between qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications for further learning.

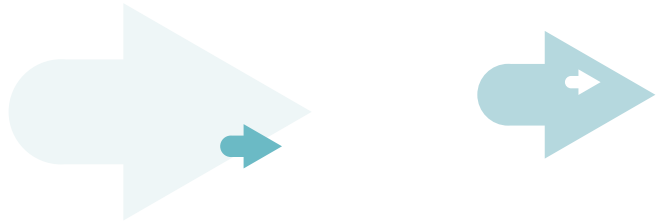
In some circumstances, for example when NQF levels include qualifications from different educational sectors, it may be helpful to refer to the criteria defining these different qualifications in the process of linking levels to the EQF. This will make the understanding of the EQF-NQF links more meaningful to a wider range of stakeholders who might appreciate qualifications descriptors more readily than new and possibly general NQF level descriptors.

Some NQFs have been referenced to the EQF at an early stage of development and have made it clear that the levels in the NQF have not been fully populated with qualifications. In these cases, the referencing report defines the timeline when it is expected that these 'empty levels' will be filled.

Information on the (legal) status of implementation, scope, guiding principles of the framework and its qualifications is key for a better understanding of the NQF that is referenced to the EQF. All countries include qualifications awarded in the formal education and training system in their NQF. However, NQFs do not always cover all subsystem of the education and training systems, and similarly not all qualifications from a specific subsystem may be included in the framework. Therefore, referencing reports need to present clear information on whether general, vocational education and training, higher education and other subsystems that are part of the formal education and training are all covered by the NQF.

Comprehensive qualifications frameworks can aim to cover qualifications in the formal education and training systems as well as qualifications awarded outside the formal system, by private awarding bodies, companies and qualifications based on the validation of informal and non-formal learning. Some NQFs are already open towards qualifications awarded outside the formal system, while others are planning or considering including such qualifications in their NQFs at a later stage of the development. In order that a wider audience could appreciate this dimension of the framework and thus the variety of qualifications included, the referencing report needs to present information on what kind of qualifications outside the formal system are in the NQF and any future steps that are planned.

Qualifications from the formal system and those gained outside the formal system should meet the same criteria to be included in the NQF. Traditionally, qualifications from the formal system are better known and more trusted among stakeholders and thus such explicit criteria may not have been developed or made explicit in the formal system. However, for qualifications gained outside the formal system such criteria needed to be made explicit in order to ensure that they are treated in the same way as those from the formal system. For example, in Ireland there are criteria for qualifications in the formal system and also for including qualifications awarded by private providers, which are rather similar.



NQFs are also covered by quality assurance and are considered to be a tool to guarantee quality (see criterion 5 below). For example, the NQF can be used as a ‘gateway’ for approved (quality assured qualifications). Phrases such as ‘this qualification is *in* the framework’ arise from this quality assurance function. Entry to such frameworks is governed by criteria and transparency of the referencing process is enhanced if such criteria are included in referencing reports.

In many countries national registers, catalogues or databases are in use, which store information on qualifications, qualifications standards, certificates, degrees, diplomas, titles and/or awards available in a country or a region. International enquiries about qualifications are likely to refer to these databases, especially if they are available through a website. The databases usually include definitions of all officially recognised qualifications and it is common for each one to be ascribed an NQF level⁽²⁴⁾. Post-referencing these databases can include an EQF level, as it is the case, for example, in Scotland⁽²⁵⁾:

Concurrent development of an NQF and referencing of this NQF to the EQF

In implementing the EQF many countries have developed an NQF and then referenced the new NQF levels to the EQF⁽²⁶⁾. The following sequence has been observed.

Qualification → NQF level
followed by
NQF level → EQF level

This two-part sequence is important since a robust NQF is built upon a clear logic of levels that reflects the national position and all stakeholder groups are agreed on the structure and its implementation. Only after the NQF has been developed can qualifications be assigned to levels. Then the second step is possible – these robust NQF levels are referenced to EQF levels.

In practice the two distinct processes can appear to be replaced by a single process of:

Qualification → NQF → EQF

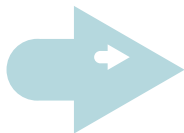
At first glance, there appears to be little difference between the two-step approach and this concurrent process. It is clear that where it is accepted that the EQF has influenced the NQF, the process is logical. However, there are some possible challenges for a concurrent process, for example:

- The most serious task, the foundation for referencing, is the development of the NQF and attention needs to be focussed here at first without the possible distraction of referencing.

(24) Although these registers may exist without an NQF and vice versa.

(25) <http://www.sqf.org.uk/Search%20The%20Database>

(26) In the EQF conference in Budapest (2011) it was concluded that ‘Member States are in the midst of complicated multi-dimensional processes with many factors involved (NQF development, shift to learning outcomes, EQF referencing’.



- The attention of the international experts involved in referencing may be directed towards the NQF design and issues arising, this can be partly justified since the levels that are established are important for the EQF referencing process.
- The stakeholders' attention is deflected towards the NQF and its implications, the link with the EQF and the referencing process is a second stage of engagement where the interest of stakeholder groups may not be as strong. The opportunity to make a special event of the referencing process is weakened.
- There may be a less critical approach to the decisions about numbers of levels and the forms of descriptors in the NQF since it is expected there will be an unquestionable match with the EQF.
- Where there is a problem with the qualification-NQF process there may be a tendency for it to be considered as an issue with the NQF-EQF process instead of being resolved at the NQF stage. For example, where a qualification is comfortably located in an NQF but the consequential EQF level is seriously problematic.

There is a third case for meeting the requirements of criterion 4.

Reference Qualification → EQF

This can apply where there is in effect no explicit NQF with descriptors that are detailed and tailored to national qualifications⁽²⁷⁾. In these cases it is demonstrated how the learning outcomes for main qualifications, sometimes called reference qualifications, correspond to EQF level descriptors. Latvia has referenced the Latvian education system to the EQF with regard for level descriptors and outcomes for stages in the education and training system or 'reference' qualifications. In this way implicit qualification levels have been identified and the establishment of the Latvian NQF is supported by the EQF referencing process.

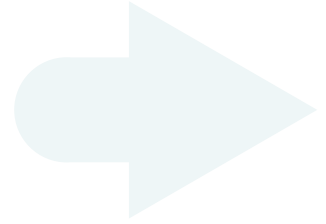
To prepare the descriptors of national education levels in Latvia, experts on the basis of the state education standards, occupational standards and study subjects standards, elaborated the descriptors of education levels for:

- General secondary education;
- General basic education;
- Vocational basic education;
- Vocational secondary education;
- Vocational education.

(27)

It may also be the case where NQF descriptors are the same as the EQF descriptors such as in the case of Portugal where there is an explicit NQF with descriptors and levels that are identical to those of the EQF.

A consultation process on the referencing of the Latvian formal qualifications to the EQF was arranged and as a result of the referencing process, the 8-level LQF was established. Subsequently, all formal qualifications from general, vocational, and higher education sectors were linked to the LQF/EQF. The results of this 1st phase (2009-2011) of the referencing process are presented in the EQF referencing report from September 2011. The 2nd referencing phase (2013-2015) will include a larger



range of qualifications, and the current report will be revised taking into account possible amendments in legislations and project results (for example, on sectoral qualifications frameworks). The LQF is also expected to experience revision and introduction of new qualifications.

For those countries that have adopted the EQF descriptors for the NQF, criterion 4 is most relevant. In the Estonian report it is even stated that all criteria for referencing the EstQF to the EQF are defined in terms of classifying qualifications in the EstQF. Although this approach was accepted in Estonia, the referencing report also informs that it appeared during the referencing of Estonian qualifications that the level descriptions of the EstQF should be amended in order to better meet the requirements of the formal education and professional qualifications in the country.

Criterion 5

The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation).

The success of the referencing process, and the mutual trust it generates, is closely linked to criterion 5 that addresses quality assurance (and to criterion 6 which is discussed below). Referencing reports need to explain national quality assurance systems and demonstrate the links between them. Particularly important here is the ways quality assurance procedures influence the design and award of qualifications. These procedures are powerful influences on trust and confidence in qualifications in the country and will have the same strong effect outside the country if they are explained clearly. For example, procedures that define the content of qualifications, the nature of curricula, assessment practices, awarding procedures, certification requirements.

If quality assurance agencies have been involved in preparing the NQF and the proposal for referencing, or if they have given official (and positive) statements during the process, the statement could convey this information and guarantee that this criterion has been fulfilled. If such an agreement were to be missing from a referencing report, it would seriously undermine the credibility of the referencing.

Annex III of the EQF Recommendation provides some guidance as regards how to present a country's quality assurance arrangements – with a particular attention to certification processes. However, it is clear from the thirteen referencing reports produced so far that presenting quality assurance processes for international readers

is a challenging task. There are several reasons for this, such as the fact that much quality assurance is based on implicit agreements and processes, and are, therefore, difficult to describe formally. A second reason is that there is sometimes no single body with responsibility for all quality assurance – several bodies that manage the process over a specific sector or a subsystem often carry out this function. A third reason is that documentation is usually a diverse corpus of texts with little obvious linkage between them. The countries that have already referenced their qualifications systems confirm that the referencing process is an opportunity to bring coherence to quality assurance arrangements – this is possible because all of the main quality assurance bodies have been involved in referencing.

As qualifications systems are evolving towards more focus on learning outcomes, quality assurance systems are also moving towards making sure that expected learning outcomes are met when a qualification is awarded. Many quality assurance systems were traditionally based on ensuring the quality of inputs (teachers' qualification, teaching methods, etc.) but the EQF referencing reports show that processes directed at outcomes are progressively being introduced.

Annex III of the EQF Recommendation covers quality assurance arrangements for higher education and VET in the context of the EQF. The criteria presented in Annex III are consistent with the European Quality Assurance for VET ⁽²⁸⁾ (EQAVET) and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for higher education ⁽²⁹⁾. These criteria assert *inter alia* that quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions and that they should be regularly evaluated, as should the agencies that carry out quality assurance. These quality assurance procedures should include reference to context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving particular emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.

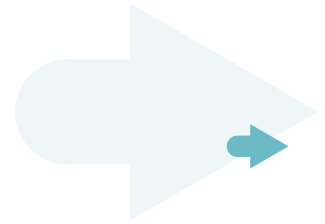
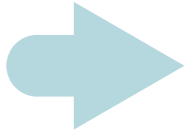
In addition to explaining the scope or breadth of the quality assurance system(s) in the country, some attention should be paid to how they work, and some examples can be provided. For example, in relation to learning outcomes they might refer to:

- planning: defining learning outcomes and making sure they are relevant,
- implementing: using learning outcomes in teaching, learning and testing and grading individuals;
- reviewing the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved
- feedback: evaluating if the planned learning outcomes are relevant for users including the labour market, teaching, assessment and updating learning outcomes based on this data.

Other quality assurance measures that could be addressed include, for example, qualification requirements for teachers and trainers, accreditation and external

(28)
European Quality Assurance
Reference Framework for VET.
Summary: [http://europa.eu/
legislation_summaries/
education_training_youth/
lifelong_learning/
c11108_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11108_en.htm)

(29)
Standards and Guidelines
for Quality Assurance in the
European Higher Education
Area: [http://www.enqa.eu/files/
ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf)



evaluation of providers or programmes, relationship between bodies responsible for quality assurance from different levels and with different functions.

Criterion 6

The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.

The referencing process has proven to be particularly effective in bringing together all of the bodies that have a role in quality assurance of qualifications. These bodies often operate independently and confine their influence to one particular educational and training subsystem. In the first set of referencing reports, it is possible to identify the following range of quality assurance bodies as being important to the referencing process:

- the government ministries, particularly the education and labour ministries;
- qualifications bodies, particularly those with national oversight of the system or of the major subsystems (general, vocational, higher education) but also those bodies that assess learning, issue awards and certificates;
- independent quality assurance bodies such as those that set standards for learning in general, vocational and higher education and those that evaluate institutions;
- bodies that set occupational, vocational and educational standards in a country or employment/education sector;
- bodies that manage the development and implementation of NQFs, especially the NQFs that regulate standards in sectors and nationally; and
- bodies that disburse public funds to learning institutions and require compliance with quality criteria.

In some countries, the responsibility for quality assurance process is mainly located at provider level and this means that many institutions can be considered responsible for quality assurance. The coordination here often lies with the ministry of education or a body established by government for this purpose.

Quality assurance bodies are key stakeholders in the referencing process and are required to agree the level to level referencing and the way the quality assurance system in the country is described. This includes the laws, regulations, procedures and any points of discussion for improvements. This is what is intended by the phrase stated agreement used in the criterion 6.



Criterion 7

The referencing process shall involve international experts.

The EQF aims to improve international understanding of qualifications. Consequently the referencing process should clarify the relationship between the EQF and the national qualifications systems for a person without particular understanding of the qualifications system concerned. International experts have a role in making sure that this expectation is met.

Experience shows that these experts do not need to be involved in all stages of the referencing process. However, they can be involved productively when concrete levelling issues begin to arise and as a draft version of the report becomes available.

Different possibilities exist for involving international experts in finalising the report. For example, they are invited to meetings with a working group responsible for conducting the referencing process and they are asked to provide written feedback and recommendations.

The referencing report should state who was involved and explain why these experts were invited and how they were involved in the process (roles, activities) and at what stage and how their feedback was taken into account.

Recent experience of use of international experts in referencing suggests the following:

- The blending of experience of international experts should be considered more seriously. The combination of international experts is particularly important when concurrent self-certification is intended.
- The *critical friend* approach with the person in charge of coordinating the referencing process/drafting the referencing report is a good starting point but there also needs to be official contact with steering groups where the views of the experts can be expressed and questions asked.
- Attention needs to be sharply focussed on the referencing process and not specifically on the process of development of an NQF.
- Reflections on the report and the referencing process from the international experts could be included in the referencing report as this would give an extra layer of transparency to the report.



- The international experts could be involved in the presentation of the referencing report in the EQF Advisory Group; perhaps providing some short comments on important points for international trust, such as the engagement of stakeholder groups.

Further discussion of the roles of international experts is included in [chapter 5](#).

Criterion 8

The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.

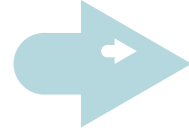
The aim of this criterion is to ensure that countries cover the entire range of qualifications levels (and types) in their framework or system, thus reflecting the overarching, lifelong learning character of the EQF. The expectation of a single report means that whatever the scope of the referencing process⁽³⁰⁾, this report should be written in consultation with stakeholders and agreed by them.

A single report should contain all relevant information on the results of the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF and refer to further resources for evidence if necessary. A single report agreed by all national authorities and supported by stakeholders concerned also contributes to the legitimacy of the report and communicates a straightforward message to the citizens. Reporting on referencing in two or more documents has raised concerns within the EQF Advisory Group in relation to the coordination of the referencing process.

Experience shows that countries that are conducting the EQF referencing and the QF EHEA self-certification processes simultaneously more and more often present the results of the two processes in one document. This is encouraged by others as it increases transparency and suggests good coordination between the two processes at national level. However, it is recommended that in such a document the EQF referencing and the self-certification criteria need to be addressed separately.

The referencing report is a statement of its time, a snapshot, and will inevitably become out-of-date and require updating. A country may foresee that in view of developments in the qualifications system, there will be a need to present another report in a couple years presenting the situation at that moment in time. It is

(30)
By scope of the referencing process is understood the range of qualifications covered by the national system or NQF that is referenced to the EQF.



useful if the referencing report gives an indication of future developments and how these could impact on the need for a new or updated referencing report.

The centrality of the set of ten criteria in the referencing report is underlined in this criterion. A response to each criterion needs to be included in the report. For further information please refer to [chapter 9](#).

Criterion 9

The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.

A part of EQF implementation is the building up of the EQF portal⁽³¹⁾. This tool presents information on the referencing process and the results of the referencing process to a wider public in a visual form. It also allows direct comparison of qualifications levels in the ET 2020 countries via EQF levels. For a better understanding of what national qualification levels mean examples of the main qualifications or qualification types are provided for each national qualifications level.

The choice of examples of qualifications to include in the EQF portal is important. The main qualifications used for mobility are regarded as essential, but so are qualifications that lead to higher education entry and to fully qualified skilled worker status (such as those covered in apprenticeship training). In some countries, there are many qualifications at some EQF levels and it is important here to identify the main qualification types, rather than specific qualifications.

In the next phase of the EQF portal development links to the national qualifications databases and registers will be developed. Where national qualifications databases already exist, which include information on qualifications that are linked to the NQF, it is useful for stakeholders if links to national qualifications frameworks (and any associated guidance and databases) are included as this will help people from outside the country to access information.

(31)
[http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/
compare_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/compare_en.htm)



Criterion 10

Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.

Most countries emphasise that indicating an EQF level on a certificate would help stakeholders to judge the level of national qualifications and facilitate comparison of qualifications from different systems (for example in case of mobile workers). Once the level-to-level agreements are in place and qualifications are linked, through national qualifications systems, to the EQF levels, the EQF can be seen as adding international currency to national qualifications and facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications. For this added value to be clear to all users, all qualifications in NQFs need to be associated with an EQF level.

Most countries (for example, Denmark, Estonia, Croatia and Latvia) explicitly state that they find important a direct expression of the EQF level on new certificates and diplomas. In the Danish referencing report there is a statement that is typical for recent reports:

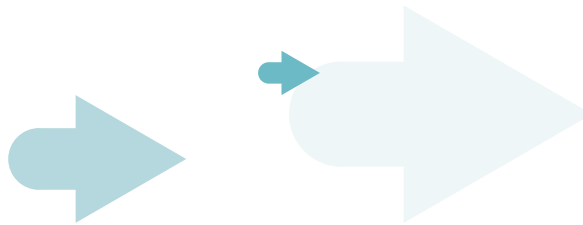
The coordination committee will by the end 2011 secure, in cooperation with the relevant ministries, that all new certificates, degrees and Europass documents contain a clear reference linking the NQF to the appropriate EQF level: a reference to the NQF and EQF levels will be added to certificates/certificate supplements in general upper secondary education, vocational education and training and adult education and training; a reference to the NQF and EQF levels will be added to the diploma supplements for degrees in higher education.

Various countries chose to make reference to the relevant EQF level and provide further information on a specific qualification in Europass supplements, the Certificate Supplement – complementing VET certificates (for example, in France), and the Diploma Supplement – complementing diplomas in higher education (for example, in Ireland and Denmark).

In some of the countries (for example, the UK and Ireland) it has been agreed that, for internal communication purposes, the EQF level will be indicated in the national databases of qualifications. Each qualification in the database includes a reference to its EQF level (for example, in the Scottish database⁽³²⁾). These countries put

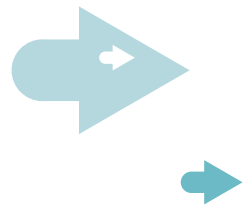
significant efforts in promoting their NQF within the country, and are concerned about communicating various levels (NQF, EQF, QF-EHEA) towards citizens.

Other countries (for example, Denmark and Estonia) see value in both indicating EQF level on certificates and supplements as well as in national qualifications databases. This approach is part of a broad communication strategy to provide consistent information on the EQF from various sources.



(32)

An example can be found on
[http://www.scf.org.uk/
Course/&c=941](http://www.scf.org.uk/Course/&c=941)



5 The referencing process: some essentials

Countries completing the referencing process have underlined some key indicators of quality⁽³³⁾. These countries stress the need for good coordination of the process and ensuring that there are clear agreements on the competence and responsibilities of those involved. The referencing process must involve wide participation and consultation with stakeholders. Taken as a whole, the process must be transparent to all stakeholders with an interest in the qualifications system.

Using the ten referencing criteria

The basis of the referencing process is the challenge of meeting the requirements of the ten criteria amplified in [chapter 4](#) above. The criteria have provided a structure for the process of referencing and for the report of the process. The existing experience points to the importance of explaining in full, in each referencing report, how each criterion is addressed in the referencing process. Most questions from international audience (and therefore uncertainty) have arisen when the response to a criterion is unclear or not available in the referencing report.

The usefulness of an NQF

The regular Cedefop survey⁽³⁴⁾ indicates that all countries that do not yet have an NQF are making progress towards a national qualifications framework and that the stages of development are very different. As stated earlier, the development of the NQF is seen by countries as a precursor to the referencing process and the referencing process is necessarily slow, whilst NQF development proceeds.

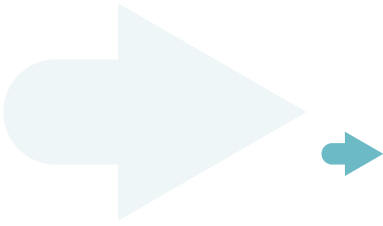
NQFs do not necessarily follow the pattern of the EQF in terms of levels, categories of descriptors (knowledge, skills and competence) and the descriptors themselves. The creation of an NQF that meets national expectations well may present a challenge in the referencing process. These differences will require the application of the best-fit principle.

Differences in levels

Several countries have different numbers of levels in their NQF to the eight used in the EQF. For example, in Scotland there are twelve levels. These twelve levels have been related to the EQF levels using best fit as shown in the [chapter 10](#).

(33)
Conference on the European Qualifications Framework, Budapest, 25-26 May, 2011

(34)
The Development of National Qualifications Frameworks in Europe. October 2011, Cedefop, Thessaloniki.
See <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19313.aspx>



Differences in categories of descriptors

Some countries have defined the areas of skills and competence in a different way to that used for the EQF. For example, in the Netherlands, the skills category has been subdivided into a range of sub-categories that reflects its use in Dutch qualifications:

Skills

- Applied knowledge
- Problem solving skills
- Learning and development skills
- Information skills
- Communication skills

In Portugal, the competence category is better understood as ‘attitudes’: this category covers the aspects of autonomy and responsibility. See the example in more detail in [chapter 10](#) in the following way:

Differences in descriptors

Descriptors of qualification levels need to reflect accurately the common understanding of the users of the qualifications. This is likely to require that as an NQF is interpreted by a subsystem the descriptors will become more specific to that subsystem. This has been taken into account at the design stage of the Polish NQF. The chart in annex shows how the generic EQF level descriptors can be linked to more detailed descriptors in the Polish NQF (PQF). However, these PQF universal descriptors remain generic and are interpreted again in a way that is suitable for general education, vocational education and higher education.

Some project examples also show how it is possible for a business sector to interpret the generic level descriptors in the EQF or in an NQF and develop a set of descriptors that have more meaning for the specific sector⁽³⁵⁾. The example of the FIRST project in the financial services is in [chapter 10](#).

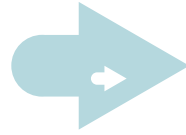
Different kinds of qualifications

Comprehensive NQFs usually also reflect the different kinds of qualifications that aroused in countries. Experience shows that countries may understand EQF levels differently and use them for different purposes. Qualifications of one kind can be valued in one country and be absent from the provision in another.

For example, it can be observed that level 5 is used differently in national contexts and that it accommodates a variety of different qualifications since it operates at the crossroads of general, vocational and higher education and training. In some countries, EQF level 5 might include a wide range of different qualifications (such

(35)

This table is drawn from the FIRST project, Financial Services EQF Translators in the EU, www.firstebtn.eu



as short-cycle HE programmes, different types of higher professional qualifications, master craftsperson qualifications) while other countries might decide to link only certain types of qualifications or even only certain individual qualifications to EQF level 5 via referencing their national system or framework to the EQF. In some countries, EQF level 5 does currently not include any qualifications, i.e. it is 'empty'. In these cases, countries usually plan to reform their qualifications system and develop (new types of) qualifications to be linked to level 5 at a later stage.

There are also differences in the ways qualifications at the lowest levels are valued. In some countries, there is a view that qualification at these levels must have some labour market value but some see that general educational objectives are equally if not more important. These educational objectives include motivating people to learn or facilitating progression. In countries where no qualifications are allocated to an NQF level that is referenced to EQF level 1 there are often learning and assessment activities that can help the learner to a qualification that links to EQF level 2, the latter being the lowest level available in the NQF. Rather than introduce a level 1 qualification, or entry levels below level 1, the aim is to recognise level 2 as the minimum achievement that is recognised in the framework and in the labour market and provide learning opportunities and support for people to reach this minimum level of qualification.

National governance arrangements for referencing to the EQF

Criterion 1 of the 'EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures' asks for transparent information on the responsibilities of those involved in the referencing report. The experiences made by the EQF-Ref project partners clearly suggests that thorough coordination on a national level is needed when different national bodies are involved in the referencing processes⁽³⁶⁾.

To determine the responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the EQF referencing process and producing the report, it needs to be clear who is in charge of the process and who makes the final decisions. The various roles and responsibilities should also be described in the referencing reports. In some countries, one body (often the relevant ministry) has the final authority in the decision making process. This is different from countries with highly decentralised structure, where the process is based on the principle of decision making by consensus.

The EQF recommendation foresees a specific role for EQF NCPs in the referencing process. There are no European level guidelines for the structure and operation of NCPs. The role and tasks of the NCP and its institutional profile therefore differs across countries.

(36)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), p16.
www.EQF-Ref.eu

Shifting towards use of learning outcomes

There is evidence⁽³⁷⁾ that all Education and Training 2020 countries are making progress towards a more substantial use of learning outcomes than exists at present. The referencing process depends on being able to compare the descriptors of the levels of the national qualifications framework or system with those of the EQF (written as learning outcomes). No national qualifications system could relate to the EQF without such explicit link between levels. However, it is often the case that the learning outcomes approach is implemented in the different education subsystems in different countries to various degrees at the level of individual qualifications, standards, assessment criteria, curricula, etc. This means that the process of describing the referencing may well differ from subsystem to subsystem.

For a full discussion of the use of learning outcomes with information on the different settings in which they are used see the EQF Note 4 Using learning outcomes⁽³⁸⁾.

Stakeholder involvement/management

Countries that have completed the referencing have made it clear that substantial engagement with stakeholders is a prerequisite for a robust, trusted and longstanding referencing outcome.

In relation to the overall legitimacy of the referencing process and the report, the importance of the involvement of national stakeholders and their support towards the referencing have repeatedly been confirmed by the EQF Advisory Group and stakeholders in other countries. The presentation of the results of the referencing process in the referencing report is strengthened, if national stakeholders involved in the referencing process are explicitly mentioned in the report and their opinion is summarised or quoted in the report. An important stakeholder and relevant authorities are those responsible for the recognition of qualifications, including the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARICs) and European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENICs).

(37)

Cedefop (2009). The shift to learning outcomes: policies and practices in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Available from Internet: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/12900.aspx>

(38)

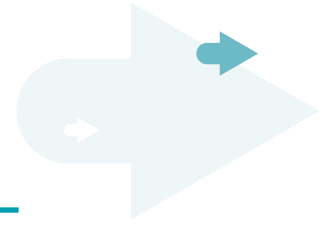
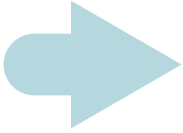
Using Learning Outcomes, European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 4, European Commission, Brussels.

It is important to reflect on the following questions:

Who should be involved and contribute to the results to ensure the success of the referencing?

How should stakeholders be involved (for example, in working groups, advisory boards or in a consultation process)?

What is the position and role of stakeholders (for example, social partners) in the referencing process?



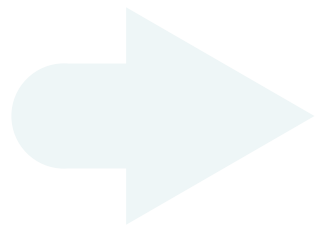
There have been different ways of involving stakeholders in the process but the experience so far suggests that the following stakeholder groups have been involved in high-level groups (i.e. groups steering the referencing process or those directly in charge of carrying it out):

- A government ministry (or designated agency) in the capacity of leading/managing.
 - Education experts (in various education and training sectors and levels – general education, vocational education and training, higher education, further education and training, etc.) including:
 - Curriculum and Assessment
 - Learning providers/institutions
 - Teachers and trainers
 - Learners
 - Social partners including
 - Employers
 - Trade unions
 - Professional bodies
 - Organisations awarding qualifications (if different from the above types)
 - A wider range of government bodies responsible for qualifications in their area (for example, ministries of youth, agriculture and social security)
 - Non-governmental organisations including volunteering organisations and charities (in some systems these may be in charge of specific qualifications)
 - Education and training funding agencies
 - Qualifications agencies (if existing)
 - Quality assurance agencies (or bodies with this role)
 - Research community (especially international experts and technical consultants)
-

There has also been widespread and open consultation that has enabled other people with an interest in this field to participate. Some of the countries held seminars and conferences that were designed to engage stakeholders in the referencing process and allow an interaction between the various stakeholder groups.

International cooperation and international experts

The development and implementation of the EQF has led to opportunities for international exchange. The EQF Advisory Group meetings, EQF NCP meetings (including joint meetings with the national correspondents for the QF-EHEA) and the Learning Outcomes Group meetings are examples of fora for exchange of views. Additionally, there have been a series of international conferences (including global ones) and



national conferences on the subject of the EQF and referencing national systems to it (including those organised by EQF projects). Several countries have arranged smaller scale seminars with international expert participants to examine specific issues in depth. Cedefop and ETF have been catalytic in facilitating exchanges between countries on the subject of the EQF. The Flemish report states:

...Flanders had the opportunity to exchange ideas with experts working on the National Qualifications Framework of England, Wales and Northern-Ireland and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the New Zealand and Australian Credit and Qualifications Framework, the Irish and South-African frameworks and the French 'Répertoire Nationale de Certification'. In collaboration with the European Commission and Cedefop a seminar regarding the level descriptors with English, Norwegian and Czech colleagues was organised...

Leonardo da Vinci and LLP projects have also been an effective means of international exchange⁽³⁹⁾. For example, Estonia reports that a project with partners from Finland, Latvia, Romania, and the Czech Republic was influential in the development of the EstQF and the consequential referencing process. The report from the Czech Republic also includes some information on how the cooperation in some transnational projects has contributed to and supported the preparation of the referencing report.

All of this activity is an important way for countries to learn about the referencing processes used elsewhere and to test out solutions to particular local problems.

International experts can add value to the referencing process by, for example, offering advice on the transparency of the process, external benchmarks for levels and communicating the outcomes of referencing to an international audience. One country referred to these experts as 'eye openers and view broadeners'.

The decision about how to best use international experts is for the host country to decide. Experience so far suggests that two or three international experts can be used effectively. It is useful for countries undertaking the referencing process to indicate their reasons and motivation for inviting experts from certain countries.

The selection of experts

Experience shows that involving experts with a variety of different backgrounds might be beneficial. For example, the EQF Ref project⁽⁴⁰⁾ concluded that countries could choose experts:

- from countries that share similar structures ('like-minded countries') experts will not need much time to appreciate the qualifications system;
- from countries with very different structures experts are able to give feedback on whether the referencing report's information is understandable for someone not acquainted with the system;

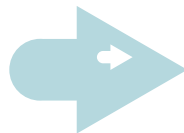
(39)

Information on EQF projects is accessible here: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/eqf/documents/eqf_projects_overview.pdf

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/project_reports/project_reports_ka1_en.php

(40)

Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), 31pp. www.EQF-Ref.eu



- from countries where there is existing cooperation (for example, such cooperation usually exists with neighbouring countries or between countries with a lot of learners and/or workers mobility);
- from countries where cooperation should be established or intensified.
- with specific competence in one or more of these areas – general education, vocational education and training, higher education;
- who are familiar with other transparency instruments and related initiatives (such as QF-EHEA, ECVET, ECTS, Europass, EQARF);
- from different institutional background, some countries invite experts from national bodies that are themselves in charge of the referencing process in their country or are at least involved in the decision making process;
- who are not representing national bodies, but have expertise in qualifications systems and frameworks in the European context and are familiar with referencing or self-certification processes;
- who have experience in working on the European level, in particular membership of the EQF Advisory Group or because they cooperate in the network of NCPs or of the Bologna Correspondents;
- who have good language skills.

In Latvia, for example, the following criteria were considered for selecting the international experts:

- Expert's experience in developing and introducing NQF;
- Expert's knowledge in education field;
- Expert's knowledge concerning the Latvian education system.

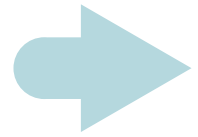
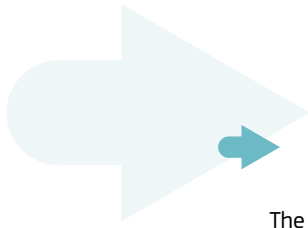
The experts represented one of the succeeding education fields:

- Vocational education
- Higher education
- Overarching framework.

The geographical location of countries the experts represented was also taken into account:

- One expert from a neighbouring country;
- One expert from a country with similar education system features;
- One expert from a country, which is not a neighbouring country.

It is generally agreed that the experts should be open-minded and should provide feedback to national referencing bodies as 'critical friends'. The experts also need to exercise professional judgement in balancing transparency and openness with the need to keeping some information confidential – for example, they should take care with the issues or problems arising during the referencing process.



The decision on whether or not to include a formal statement from each international expert depends on the message the national authority in charge of the referencing report wants to communicate. For example, positive statements of international experts could be used for underlining the credibility of the report. Nevertheless, a statement of an international expert pointing out critical issues could also be used for enhancing credibility of the report because it enhances transparency. It is in each country's decision whether and what kind of statements to include in the report. However, it is recommended to discuss the decision and also the respective statement with the international experts⁽⁴¹⁾.

Feedback from the international experts that have already supported the referencing process suggests that it is a demanding role. They underlined the usefulness of a specific briefing document that helps them understand the qualifications system and the intentions for the referencing process. Meeting the main national stakeholders in a referencing meeting was also considered important. The experts also found that the fact that the countries concerned in referencing were already using learning outcomes made it easier for them to contribute to the referencing process.

Possible methods/techniques for referencing

The road to a complete EQF referencing is a new one for all countries. However there are some useful indicators of methods that might be used. For example, there is a growing literature on frameworks and levels that is made up of policy documents and research analysis. This literature does not only help in the design of NQFs but it also provides insights into the general understanding of what qualifications levels can mean in different contexts. The EQF testing projects provide a multilingual bibliography of this literature.

(41)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), p32.

(42)
This Note will be updated regularly.

(43)
See the Cedefop survey of NQF developments that is updated regularly Cedefop (2010b) *The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe (August 2010)* <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/16666.aspx>
Cedefop (2009b) *The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe (September 2009)* <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5030.aspx>

In addition to this literature, there is a growing base of empirical evidence built on actual practice of referencing (the referencing reports and this Note⁽⁴²⁾) and the testing of NQFs that are designed to link to the EQF⁽⁴³⁾.

The recently developed referencing reports are the obvious source of information about technical methods for referencing. Sometimes these are explicit in the reports and sometimes the technical detail is included in background documents. The technical methods include linguistic analysis of descriptor text – looking at whole descriptors and component parts. They also involve analysis of the hierarchies and progression paths implied by descriptors. The latter leads to consideration of links with other meta-frameworks (the QF-EHEA) and how this is reflected in level-to-level referencing. The descriptors for major national qualifications are also a source of evidence that can be used in a technical matching process.

In those cases where the NQF is closely based on the EQF, such as Portugal, the technical approach will probably differ from the approaches taken in countries with already existing NQFs. However, the matching of the descriptors need to be demonstrated, for example, by explicitly describing the comparability of the terms and categories used. Furthermore, an explanation should be provided on how to understand the categories and the key words used for describing the levels and used in the national qualifications system as well as regarding the reason and logic for using them in the NQF descriptors⁽⁴⁴⁾.

In order to demonstrate the link between the NQF and EQF, it is recommended to use different kinds of methods when carrying out the technical analysis.

For example, the referencing committee in Denmark conducted a three-step analysis using the following methodology:

- structural comparison of the two frameworks,
- conceptual comparison of the two frameworks,
- linguistic analysis of level descriptors in the two frameworks.

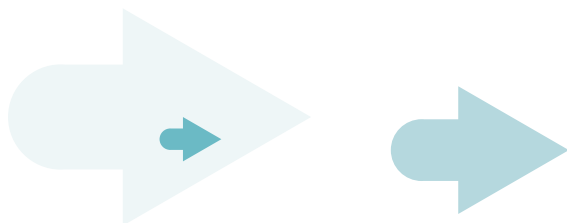
In addition to the technical method a social analysis can be used so that current practice in relation to implicit levels is taken into account: for example, seeking out common understandings of what a specific level of learning represents in terms of a hierarchy of learning, jobs and future opportunities for the learner. In the social analysis approach it is especially important to consider evidence gathered from stakeholders and published literature on the value and status of key qualifications and present this evidence in support of the proposed referencing. Whilst the results of this social analysis might appear more ephemeral than those of a technical process, the value added by the social analysis is critically important to trust amongst stakeholders, especially citizens.

The process of best-fit also includes deciding on the weighting given to the technical and social dimensions in the final referencing decision. In the case of the English and Northern Ireland report the social dimension was given a strong weighting in matching level 4 of the national framework to the EQF.

The essential concept of best-fit

The procedure for referencing a set of levels in a national qualifications system to those in the EQF is likely to be imperfect and require the use of best-fit. The concept of best-fit is not a new one – it is a long-standing mathematical and engineering idea for finding harmony between two sets of data or two or more devices. Its distinguishing feature is the acceptance that perfect-fit is probably not possible and some judgement or approximation is necessary to make a link and solve a problem. In the case of matching NQF and EQF level descriptors, the concept of best-fit

(44)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), p45.
www.EQF-Ref.eu



requires a common judgement from a range of stakeholders so that there can be confidence in the outcome of the approximation. It is therefore useful to consider best-fit as *a decision that is based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders*. This is exemplified in the French referencing report that states ⁽⁴⁵⁾:

As with all older systems, based on a strong tradition, some qualifications found themselves on the margin, between two levels, but the consensus reached by the stakeholders in the referencing exercise enables the cross-reference to be confirmed.

NQF descriptors are usually more detailed than those of the EQF and they are normally closely linked to the specific national context, therefore it is unlikely that there will ever be a perfect correlation to the EQF descriptors that are necessarily broader and more general. The Maltese referencing report describes the Maltese Qualifications Framework (MQF) as closely aligned to the EQF levels. However, best-fit was still required in the referencing of MQF levels to the EQF levels. This is exemplified through a direct comparison of the descriptor text within the national framework to the text in the EQF descriptors.

Terminology

It may be useful to consider some other terms that use the concept of best-fit. In some national systems there is a specific alignment of levels in one framework with another – the alignment of the QF-EHEA with those of the EQF is an example. It is important to note that when using best-fit to link a level in one framework to one in another framework that the qualifications in these levels are not necessarily rendered equal or equivalent or carry the same value. Qualifications at the same level can vary in the balance of knowledge, skills and competence, the volume of learning, the route to the learning and the opportunities for permeability and progression that are offered.

In the Bologna self-certification process where countries link the levels in national higher education qualifications frameworks to the QF-EHEA, the term *substantial difference* is used in place of best-fit. The term arises in the Lisbon Recognition Convention ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Whereas best-fit requires ‘proof of fit’, the use of substantial difference requires a test to find if the link from level to level is beyond what can be justified or proved, otherwise the link is accepted.

The need for consulting informed stakeholders

All of the referencing reports to date have been written after a consultation process involving, inter alia, surveys and workshops. It can be argued that respondents to these consultations apply best-fit as a natural process of considering the implications of a proposed level-to-level matching – they consider the broad implications of the matching to the qualifications they know well. The evidence

(45)

The report will be made available on the web-site of the European Commission DG EAC in 2011: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

(46)

Council of Europe (1997) *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, Council of Europe available at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

from consultations is particularly important. If confidence levels of international users of referencing agreements are to be high, then the evidence from consultations should be included in the published referencing report. The statistics from consultations about the numbers and types of respondents selecting each of these categories is important from an international point of view.

However, a fruitful consultation process requires that those consulted have a good understanding of issues at stake. This is evident in countries that have qualifications frameworks in place for some time, but in many countries NQFs are new instruments and it is not guaranteed that stakeholders fully perceive their implications and operational principles. While the expectations from the EQF are generally high (as shown, for example, by the national consultations that took place prior to EQF adoption) some pilot projects also show that stakeholders such as employers' representatives and trade unions do not have sufficient and accessible information about EQF and how it is designed to operate. Explaining the EQF and the referencing process to these parties prior to the consultation exercise is in many countries one of the roles of the NCPs.

Differences in categories of level descriptors and numbers of levels in the NQFs

The need to apply the best-fit principle may be most obvious when there are differences in relation to the categories and dimensions used for structuring descriptors (for example, in case of the Dutch or Flemish NQF) and in particular in the number of levels in the national framework and the EQF. In case of a different number of levels, it is impossible to achieve a single level to single level match. This is the case in Scotland. In some countries a single qualification title (for example, the Leaving Certificate in Ireland and the General Certificate in Secondary Education in the UK) has learning outcomes specified that relate to more than one level in an NQF. One set of learning outcomes is linked to one NQF level and another more demanding set of learning outcomes is linked to a higher NQF level (note that the individual learner will achieve either the lower or the higher level depending on the learning outcomes s/he masters).

A crucial issue in the EQF referencing process is the number of levels that will be referenced to the EQF. Many countries have decided to develop an NQF with eight levels and these eight NQF levels will be directly linked to the eight EQF levels (NQF Level 1 to EQF Level 1, NQF Level 2 to EQF Level 2, etc.). But also in countries with an eight-level NQF, a direct level-to-level referencing is not always possible:

For example, in Denmark the referencing of the levels in the NQF to the EQF concluded that where levels 2-5 in the NQF can confidently be referenced to the equivalent levels 2-5 in the EQF, NQF level 1 is considered to be more demanding than the EQF Level 1. Therefore based on the linguistic analysis – based on

the best-fit principle – level 1 in the NQF is rather confidently referenced to level 2 in the EQF.

EQF	NQF
LEVEL 1	LEVEL 1
LEVEL 2	LEVEL 2
LEVEL 3	LEVEL 3
LEVEL 4	LEVEL 4
LEVEL 5	LEVEL 5
LEVEL 6	LEVEL 6
LEVEL 7	LEVEL 7
LEVEL 8	LEVEL 8

Description of best-fit in referencing reports

The concept of best-fit is evident in the existing referencing reports in the process of comparing different qualifications descriptors to EQF levels. The Irish report provides examples of how the descriptions of types of awards are helpful in determining level-to-level referencing.

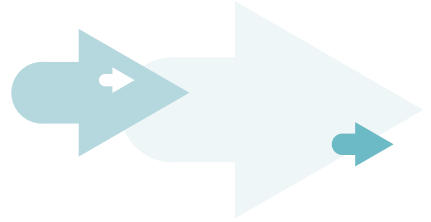
The detail of the methodology for the actual level-to-level referencing (and therefore best-fit) varies between existing referencing reports. Sometimes the process is described in detail; this enables international readers to appreciate the best-fit decisions made. The texts need to make these decisions explicit – this includes description of where the best-fit decision differs from what some stakeholders would believe to be perfect-fit.

Some questions may be useful to guide the description of best-fit in referencing reports:

Is the expression of level descriptors in the NQF suitable for the use of best-fit (for example, regarding the coverage of knowledge, skills and competence or the level of detail in writing learning outcomes).

Following on from this, what are the main differences in the scope of the NQF level descriptors when compared to those in the EQF? For example, are there additional elements such as the description of key competences or aspects of self-management? Where does a broad consideration of text in the two sets of descriptors suggest a linkage between the NQF and the European meta-framework?

Is there a potential difference between the referencing suggested by technical methodologies (text analysis, weighting of learning outcomes) and the expected referencing based on the opinion of stakeholder groups (such as the social partners)?



What evidence sources were available to support the decision making about level-to-level referencing?

Have stakeholder groups endorsed the best-fit outcomes? Is the evidence of consultation with stakeholders available?

Finally, is it possible to trust that the final referencing decisions are based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders?

Placing qualifications in an NQF based on the best-fit principle ⁽⁴⁷⁾

For classifying qualifications based on the best-fit principle on a national level, it is also possible to use technical analyses or a social approach or both. Using a more technical approach means to compare qualifications descriptors with NQF level descriptors and to allocate the qualifications based on this linguistic matching. However, this is, in many cases, possible only to a certain extent, because not all qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes. Furthermore, the question might emerge of how the descriptions actually reflect the reality.

Since many countries do not yet have sufficient learning outcomes descriptions, they may need to be indirectly identified by applying the social approach. For example, the questions could be addressed: how qualifications are currently regarded at a national level and what is the current practice in relation to implicit levels? This could be done based on empirical research, on analyses of available data or by directly consulting stakeholders. This approach could also support a better link between the learning outcomes described and the reality. In case stakeholders will be consulted, the issues need to be considered of who should be involved and in what role and how their feedback will be considered when developing consensus.

When applying the best-fit principle, levels should be understood as corridors and not as exact lines. Qualifications might include learning outcomes related to different levels. In this case, the 'centre of gravity' has to be identified. Different dimensions or categories of learning outcomes may be emphasised in qualifications placed at the same level. Therefore, qualifications allocated to the same level do not necessarily have to be similar but they can be considered as comparable in terms of level of learning outcomes achieved (principle of 'comparability but not similarity').

The following information on the meaning of the best-fit principle for classifying qualifications in the NQF is presented in the referencing report from the Netherlands:

The descriptor elements together determine the level of the qualification. The NLQF-level descriptions constitute a reference point to determine the level that a qualification has. These levels are not meant to be a precise and comprehensive

(47)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), 50pp.
www.EQF-ref.eu

description of specific qualifications. The level descriptions open up the possibility globally to compare qualifications achieved in different contexts, describing the learning outcomes and including the required quality.

The classification of a qualification in an NLQF-level is based on a comparison of the required learning outcomes of a qualification with the NLQF-level descriptions. The classification is not based on the length of a study or the amount of time a person has invested to achieve the learning outcomes. The level of a qualification is not tied to a particular study load.

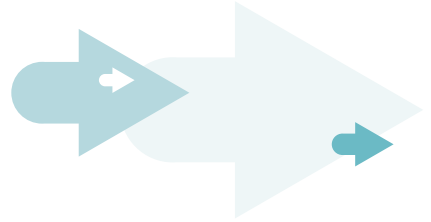
For the classification the 'best-fit' principle is used. This means that a qualification is not required to comply with all the descriptions of one level, but that it is positioned where the qualification best fits. This means qualifications of a more general character, such as havo, can be positioned at the same level as qualifications with a more vocationally-oriented character such as VET Level 4.

The fact that two or more qualifications are to be found at the same level in the NLQF indicates the grade of complexity of learning posed by these qualifications is more or less comparable. It does not necessarily mean that such qualifications have the same objectives, content and learning outcomes. Nor does it mean that the qualifications are equivalent or interchangeable.

To generate trust in this context, the procedures for classifying qualifications should be described in a transparent way, in order to justify the decisions and to provide evidence. For example, descriptions of selected qualifications (or qualifications types) could be added and the reason for allocating them to certain levels could be explained. The evidence can be based on the technical or social approach.

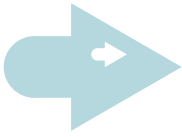
Steps towards a better referencing position

As stated earlier referencing reports give a snapshot of the relationship between the national qualifications system and the EQF. Qualifications systems change incrementally and NQFs evolve to reflect these changes and in order to respond to new challenges and expectations. Policy on education and training is developing in many countries and this has implications for the referencing outcome. NQFs are new in many countries and only as they become more established will all stakeholders fully understand the mechanisms and issues at stake. This may lead to an evolution in how the NQF is perceived and used in the country that can also impact on the referencing to the EQF. It is therefore useful to acknowledge this dynamic and to make it clear to stakeholders that the referencing is a significant first approximation towards relating a national system to the EQF but that further adjustments may be necessary.



For example in Latvia, the referencing process is organised in two stages: The referencing report published in September 2011, which describes the referencing of formal national qualifications to the LQF/EQF, concludes the 1st phase (2009-2011). The 2nd referencing phase (2013-2015) will include a larger range of qualifications, and the report will be revised taking into account possible amendments in legislation and project results. The LQF is also expected to experience revision and the introduction of new qualifications.

Some countries have made it clear that the NQF development that they plan will take place in stages. These stages will gradually lead to an NQF that is more and more comprehensive to become a more powerful tool for transparency and coherence in the qualifications system.



6 Questions arising in the referencing process

Many questions have arisen in the referencing process; some of the more common ones are included here with answers. These questions build on the set of answers provided in the first edition of this Note.

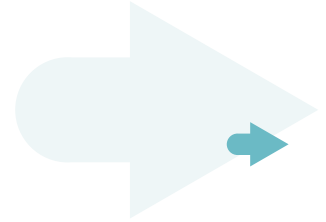
Q. What are the specific challenges in developing a comprehensive approach to referencing to the EQF for Lifelong Learning, which incorporates the outcomes of general education, VET, higher education and adult education?

A. Countries aiming to make a comprehensive approach to referencing will have developed a national qualifications framework that is comprehensive in covering all the education and training sectors. The level descriptors will be meaningful and accepted by all subsystems and the subsystems will have qualifications associated with certain levels of the NQF. This is the basic position. However, some countries may aim to develop a comprehensive approach without a comprehensive NQF. This is challenging as it presumes that tools are available that enable each subsystem to see the position of other subsystems in relation to its own qualification structure.

Building on this basic position, the concrete challenges include: firstly, ensuring a common understanding of the EQF and its descriptors needs to be developed for all the education and training subsystems. Secondly, a means of engaging the key people (subsystem leaders) with the referencing process and with each other needs to be established – a structure that will facilitate a collective approach will be necessary if the referencing outcome is to be accepted by all. The third challenge is to devise a forum for exchange and engagement of stakeholders that can be used to resolve the differences in views that may arise. A fourth challenge is to disseminate the referencing decisions across the full range of interests in education and training.

Q. Some countries also find resistance to referencing with specific stakeholder groups. How can this resistance be overcome?

A. The root of the problem needs to be identified – this could be poor management structures, poor communications, poor understanding of the need for full engagement, protection of privileged positions. Solutions clearly depend on the nature of the problems identified.



A general response is dissolving existing consultative arrangements and establishing new membership and terms of reference for advisory groups.

International experience of effective working with stakeholder groups that resist the referencing process may also be helpful.

Q. *Countries developing an NQF at the same time as referencing it to the EQF have to judge the optimum time to spend on these two processes. How can these concurrent activities be managed effectively?*

A. The value of the EQF referencing depends on the effectiveness of the NQF and how well it is understood in the country. It is also the case that national stakeholders (including students and workers) will make first reference to an NQF. It is the NQF, and not the EQF, that contains qualifications. The NQF will be designed specifically to reflect the national context and will reflect the implicit qualifications levels in the country.

For these reasons, the NQF should be the priority for development and will use a large share of time in the early stages.

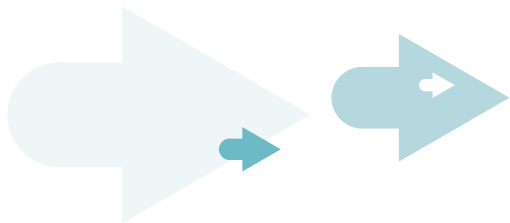
It is important to have a clear strategic plan for handling the two processes concurrently. The institutional structure needs to operate in a way that provides each initiative with the resource it needs according to the overall plan.

Sometimes the referencing process has moved ahead of the NQF development. For example, through the referencing of 'empty' frameworks or 'empty' levels. Many referencing reports state that the country will provide an updated report after some time and when more qualifications or additional parts of the qualifications system are included in the NQF. Clearly this signals that concurrent approaches can lead to interim positions on referencing.

It is also important to be aware of the fact that there are dangers of distracting the attention/contributions of international experts towards the NQF and away from referencing of the NQF which is their prime task.

Q. *How can trust be developed in referencing decisions in case the NQF implementation is still at an early stage?*

A. The EQF Advisory Group has agreed that the referencing process can be completed and a referencing report presented to the EQF Advisory Group when national authorities have agreed on national qualifications levels. Therefore, the referencing process can be achieved based on agreed national qualifications levels.



Nevertheless, in order to facilitate the assessment of the robustness of the NQF and the state of its implementation, it has proved crucial that countries provide information on the (legal) status of the NQF – at which level it has been adopted: by the government, parliament, etc.; what implementation measures have been realised and/or are foreseen; whether assessment or revision of the NQF is planned and under what timeframe.

***Q.** What factors need to be taken into account when making reference to EQF levels on new certificates and diplomas?*

A. There are several factors that have been identified so far. Indicating EQF levels in certificates and diplomas may require legislative changes. These legislations may need to be prepared well before the planned implementation date.

The cost of adjusting the design of certificates is given as a factor.

Communication on the entitlements of what an EQF level means and does not mean will need to be arranged, in order to avoid false expectations abroad.

Another factor is that some private providers may also include an EQF/NQF level on certificates even though the qualification is not included in the 'official' NQF. This could be avoided by a kind of NQF register managed by an official authority (such as NCP).

***Q.** In what ways could a country respond to critical commentary on a referencing report?*

A. From international experts:

This should be discussed as a natural part of the referencing process where the viewpoint is 'unpacked' and fully understood and then a rational response is given. The viewpoint may be based on weak appreciation of the national context and the stage of development.

The international experts should also exchange views with each other and use their different perspectives to maximum effect.

The experts can be given the opportunity to express their opinion in the referencing report

Collectively from the EQF Advisory Group:

This is a serious position as the potential value of the EQF is based on trust and a critical commentary signals that this is threatened. A constructive response is needed that may need to be facilitated or mediated by experts from the EU or another country. The constructive response to comments by the EQF AG could be to bring the issue to national committees who can attempt to address the problem.

It is recommended to give the issue time to be fully addressed. Some of the issues may be deeply rooted and require a thorough and time consuming process of resolution.

Q. Some countries have found that the EQF has stimulated wider reforms of qualifications systems. When these reforms are implemented it may be necessary to revise the referencing report. When is the right time to write the report – as soon as possible or after the reforms are in place?

A. There is divided opinion on this. Some say a report should be based on a solid foundation of embedded practice. Some say the referencing can give impetus to national reforms and the dynamic, whilst unsettling is a sign of development/improvement. In any case the referencing report should make clear its scope and when it is expected to replace it with a new one.

7 Reporting the referencing

The national referencing report reaches a national and international audience and represents a statement of the relationship of the country's qualifications levels with the EQF and the qualifications systems in other countries. It is, therefore, a critically important element of the referencing process.

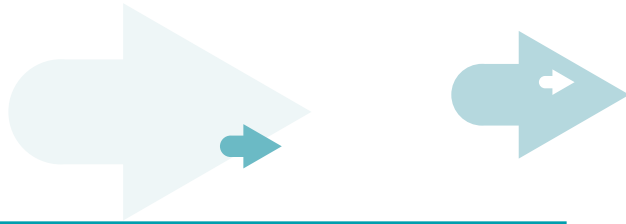
The ten referencing criteria provide a basis of a structure for the report and have been used in the reports published so far as a spine for reporting. However, it is useful to consider some additional elements included in the reports published to date.

For example, the Maltese report examines the relatively new Maltese Qualifications Framework (MQF) in some depth and uses the referencing report as a tool for dissemination of the MQF and how it relates to both the EQF and the QF-EHEA. This mechanism for highlighting national policy and instruments is clearly important, the English and Northern Irish reports put emphasis on the new Qualifications and Credit Framework. In Ireland, emphasis is given to the position of 'benchmark' awards and the ways these fit to the Irish Framework and the EQF. The reports from Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Latvia, the Netherlands and Portugal make it clear that the development of an NQF is a stage in a series of reforms to the qualifications system.

Whilst responses to the ten criteria form the core of the report, the following structure is a suggestion for an overall structure of referencing reports. It lists the parts considered as most relevant and should therefore be clearly visible in the reports. However, the structure is a matter for national consideration and it is not expected or intended that exactly the same structure or the same naming of sections should be used⁽⁴⁸⁾. For example, in case countries decide to do the referencing and self-certification simultaneously and to present the outcomes in one report, the reports usually contain a separate chapter on self-certification.

(48)

Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), 40pp. www.EQF-Ref.eu



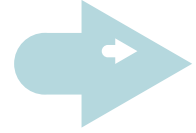
Box 2: Structure of the referencing report

- Information on the state of the report – a short statement that specifies the basis for the report (for example, is it a first version or an up-dated one) or how long it will be valid.
- Executive summary – a short overview of the results of the referencing process and, in particular, a summary of the information related to the ten criteria and procedures.
- Description of the national qualifications system and the NQF – a short presentation of the national qualifications system (including pathways, access to programmes, etc.) and the NQF (design features, aims and functions, stage of the development process) – the description should focus on information relevant for understanding the answers to the ten criteria and procedures.
- Background information – a short description of the process for preparing the report (referencing process).
- The ten criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF – the main part of the report: addressing each criterion separately
- Further information – a short presentation of, for example, plans, intentions and next steps regarding the NQF development and implementation, challenges expected or already met in this process, the expected impact of the EQF implementation (What will change at a national level?), any intentions for evaluating and revising the decisions presented in the referencing report.
- Annexes - for example, list of institutions or experts involved in the preparation of the report, examples of qualifications (that will also be presented at the EQF portal), statements from national stakeholders and/or international experts, relevant legal texts.

Source: EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), 40pp – www.EQF-Ref.eu

Some reports additionally include statements from stakeholders (for example, the Danish and the Portuguese reports), for example, describing the comments or issues raised during the referencing process that need to be further elaborated or addressed in the future. Such information can also enhance the transparency of the process and the credibility of the report.

The international perspective on national referencing reports is as important as the national perspective. As stated earlier the report is a statement of the relationship between the national system and the EQF. The referencing outcome will be of great interest to professionals who are involved in supporting mobility for lifelong learning and for work.



The international experts have an important task in ensuring the referencing outcome is clearly communicated to the international audiences and, therefore, are likely to be engaged in preparing and editing the report.

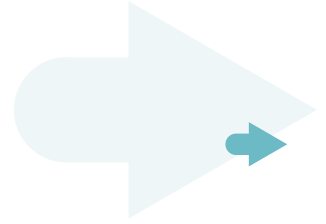
The first international audience to read the reports and begin dissemination is the EQF Advisory Group. Each report is brought before this group for scrutiny and observations are made.

The agreed procedure for the presentation of reports in the EQF Advisory Group is as follows:

- A presentation on the state of play of referencing process and the approach followed is given a couple of months before the presentation of the referencing report in the EQF Advisory Group. This is usually done before the final version of the referencing report is available. The discussion on this presentation can support the clarification of certain issues in the report.
- Referencing reports approved at national level are then sent out to members of the EQF Advisory Group about a month before the presentation in the meeting of the EQF Advisory Group.
- All members are invited to read the referencing report and prepare comments. Some members volunteer to send written comments.
- These written comments are put together in a note that will be sent out to all members before the meeting.
- The presentation of the referencing report in the EQF Advisory Group focuses on the ten referencing criteria as well as on comments and questions raised in the EQF Advisory Group members.
- The note will be updated after the meeting for documenting the feedback and discussions; this note should provide the basis for further work. The updated note will be approved at the following meeting.

This process is clearly important and it is beneficial to use it to refine the referencing report so that it becomes even more convincing when read from an international perspective and optimises trust in the national referencing outcome.

However, not all stakeholders (national and international) are interested in all the detail in the referencing reports, and the outcome and its implications are of greater interest. For easier reading and to reach broader audiences, the results of the referencing (including some examples of major qualifications) are presented in the EQF portal.



8 After referencing – the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?

There is evidence that NQFs and qualifications are evolving and are adapted to meet new needs. Therefore, it will be necessary to review the referencing outcome from time to time.. Some referencing reports already inform about planned reviews or evaluations (for example, from Denmark, the Netherlands, Estonia and Latvia). The Danish report provides the following information:

Evaluation of the Danish NQF is to be undertaken in 2012. The evaluation will examine the fulfilment of the objectives of the NQF and the validation of the level descriptors for levels 1-5.

In the report from the Netherlands, there is clear reference to the fact that the referencing of positions of qualifications to the new NLQF is seen as work in progress. Over the next two years, a new agency (NCP-NLQF) will review the positions of qualifications that are considered to be located at a level that is too high or too low. For example, this is envisaged for some labour market qualifications that have not been closely linked to the formal education provision in the past.

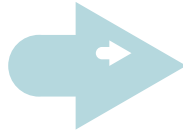
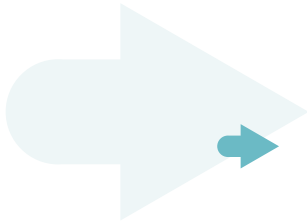
As stated earlier communications activity is likely to form the basis of most post referencing activity for NCPs. Most countries have made plans to engage with qualifications experts from other countries to ensure a two-way exchange of information and understanding of the referencing process, its outcomes and its implications.

Updating the referencing report

The EQF referencing report presents the status quo of the situation in a national context at a certain time and it needs to be considered whether changes of an NQF or of the national qualifications system that has been referenced to the EQF might require an update of the referencing report.

Update of the Maltese EQF referencing report

Malta had already presented the first version of the referencing report in 2009. In 2010, a second version of the report was published (and presented at the EQF Advisory Group in February 2011). The main changes in the revised edition are:



1. *The state-of-play of the consultation process 2010*
 2. *The renaming of sections to correspond with developments and fine-tuning of the text in relation to European developments such as those related to the Bologna and Copenhagen processes*
 3. *An added Part 5 - to illustrate the introduction of (a) the validation of informal learning in compulsory education and (b) the setting up of an awards system referenced to the Malta Qualifications Framework.*
- The revised version is available here: <http://mqc.gov.mt/revisedreferencingreport>.*

The EQF-Ref partnership⁽⁴⁹⁾ noted differences between minor changes and major changes and suggests that only the latter requires an update of the referencing report. A minor change might be the change in the name of one particular qualification, since there are no changes in the classification of this qualification in the NQF, there is also no need for changing the referencing report. A major change might be, for example, changes in the number of levels of the NQF, the placement of qualifications, the inclusion of new (types of) qualifications or additional parts of the qualifications.

Changes to referencing reports need to be communicated. The EQF Advisory Group should be informed about any changes made, and online resources (for example, information presented at the EQF portal) should always be updated. For the sake of transparency, the EQF referencing reports should always include a statement on their status (for example, first version, updated version etc.) and updated reports should indicate the changes made.

Beneficiaries of the referencing process

Only a few EQF referencing reports have been published so far. However, it is important not to forget the beneficiaries of the whole EQF project and to be aware of the EQF's two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.

The beneficiaries of the EQF are, for example, learners and workers who want to study or work abroad, employers who can use the EQF for interpreting the qualifications of foreign applicants, individuals and providers who can use the EQF for increasing progression, permeability and participation in lifelong learning. These beneficiaries do not need to be familiar with the overall technicalities of the referencing process, but they need to be informed about the results and the implications these results might have for them.

(49)
Cf. EQF-Ref project. 2011. EQF Referencing Process and Report (EQF-Ref, May 2011), 57pp.
www.EQF-Ref.eu

Including the appropriate EQF levels on qualification certificates, diplomas and 'Europass' documents as well as developing NQF websites or registers on a national level play a crucial role in the process of making the result of the EQF referencing

process visible to the citizens. However, these websites or databases need to be developed in a user-friendly way and should be linked to or connected with other relevant websites or databases (for example, with course databases or the Europass website). Furthermore, it is of particular importance that the guidance personnel is well informed about these information resources so that they can use them in their guidance processes. Also other professionals who are involved in supporting mobility for lifelong learning and for work need to be well informed about EQF referencing decisions. These include, for example, representatives of ENIC/NARIC or of national Public Employment Services.

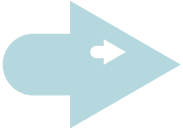
A continuing role for the National Coordination Point

It is becoming clear that the referencing process does not have a clearly defined end-point that leads to a single outcome that will remain valid for many years. Qualifications change, frameworks evolve and the referencing outcome may be affected by the outcomes of the referencing process in other countries or the outcomes of research studies. In some cases further change is envisaged in parts of the qualifications system (for example, in Estonia there are new laws for VET and major studies are due to report in the near future). In these cases the EQF NCP is seen as having a continuing role in further implementing change.

In the case of the Netherlands, the NCP is created post referencing to monitor the implementation of the NLQF and could report modifications to the referencing position in the Netherlands.

Beyond the production of the referencing report, the NCPs work on further aspects of referencing and the implementation of the EQF at national level such as:

- communicating the referencing outcome more widely (nationally and internationally);
 - monitoring and maintenance of the links between national qualifications database or register and the EQF portal;
 - monitoring the referencing reports from other countries;
 - reviewing the NQF/EQF levels of some qualifications;
 - considering new research evidence;
 - promoting the synergies between EU level tools such as ECVET and EQAVET.
-



9 Practical points for NCPs

In every country the referencing process takes a different shape. Here some general points are listed as an aide memoire for those EQF NCPs just getting started with the process.

A checklist

The steering committee

- How will members be identified?
- How will their individual contributions be optimised?
- Who will be the chairperson, will they need to be seen as an independent voice or a representative voice?
- What exactly is their role and authority?

Managing the process

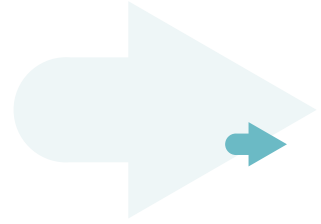
- What will be the managing agency?
- What will be the management structure (who has what responsibility)?
- What will be the timeline for the process?
- What finances will be needed (consultation, experts, gathering and analysing evidence)?
- Will there be a national ambassador for the EQF work?
- How will the work on this project tie in with other projects in the qualifications system (national and European)?
- Make EQF referencing concurrent with QF-EHEA self-certification or not?

Stakeholders

- What are the main stakeholder bodies in the qualifications system?
- How will each body's contributions be optimised?
- What will be their role in managing their own constituencies?
- What is the understanding of the EQF/NQF by stakeholders and does it need to be improved in view of making consultation meaningful?

Making a proposal for the referencing

- Who will generate the first proposal: an expert, a small group of experts?
- What methodologies will they use?
- How will the social and technical dimensions be married together?
- What role is there for best-fit?
- Will there be reference to existing referencing reports?
- How widely will the first proposal be tested?



International experts

- How many international experts will be used?
- At what stage of the process will they be engaged?
- What are the priorities for their contribution?
- What will be the profile of the experts and reasons for their selection?

Communication

- What is the level of awareness of EQF/NQF issues in the country?
- Has sufficient communication towards stakeholders been carried out before consultation?
- What needs to be communicated (what are the key stakes for the country/ different types of actors)?
- How to communicate these issues in an accessible manner?
- What resources are available?

Consulting

- Will the first proposal be the focus of a national consultation or a more limited process?
- What forms will the consultation take (surveys, events, face-to-face meetings)?
- How will the results be analysed and reported?
- Are there key groups or organisations which you know must respond to provide the appropriate validation of the referencing?

Decisions on level-to-level referencing

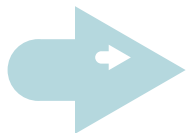
- How will a firm proposal for referencing level to level be made?
- Are there key stakeholders who must be given priority for agreement?
- How will referencing issues be resolved?

Reporting

- Who will structure the report?
- Who will write it?
- How will it be signed off as a national agreement?
- Who will present it to the EQF Advisory Group?
- How will comments be taken into account?

General communications and dissemination

- What events and publications will be needed?
- What web-based information will be made available?
- How will the referencing (and examples of qualifications) be included in the EQF portal?
- Who will deal with questions?
- What international dissemination is needed?



Useful resources for referencing

Main EQF web-sites:

- European Commission DG Education and Culture:
European Qualifications Framework
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm
- EQF Portal
http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm – All national referencing reports are available on this portal
- EQF e-community upon registration
http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework

EQF Recommendation –

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>

EQF press release –

http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/vocational_training/c11104_en.htm

EQF Guidance notes

Note 1 – Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/brochexp_en.pdf

Note 2 – Added value of National Qualifications Frameworks in implementing the EQF
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note2_en.pdf

Note 3 – Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (2011 version)
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf

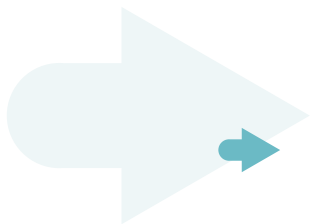
Note 4 – Using learning outcomes
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf

Key EQF Advisory Group papers

Accessible on the EQF e-community upon registration
http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework

EQF newsletters

Three issues per year. All available on the EQF portal:
http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/newsletter_en.htm



Cedefop:

- Understanding Qualifications:
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/understanding-qualifications/index.aspx>
- The selection of Cedefop publications relevant for EQF and NQF implementation is available here: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19313.aspx>

EQF pilot projects

Information on the outcomes of EQF pilot projects is available in the library of the EQF e-community upon registration
http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework

Bologna Process:

Qualifications Frameworks in the EHEA
<http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=69>

Information on mobility and lifelong learning instruments

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

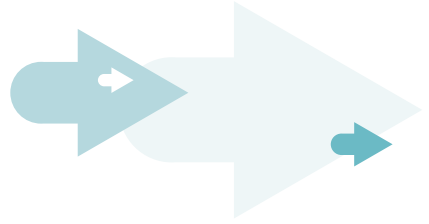
10 Annex to chapter 5

Example of the referencing of the twelve national qualifications levels of the SCQF to the EQF, as referred to in [page 41](#).

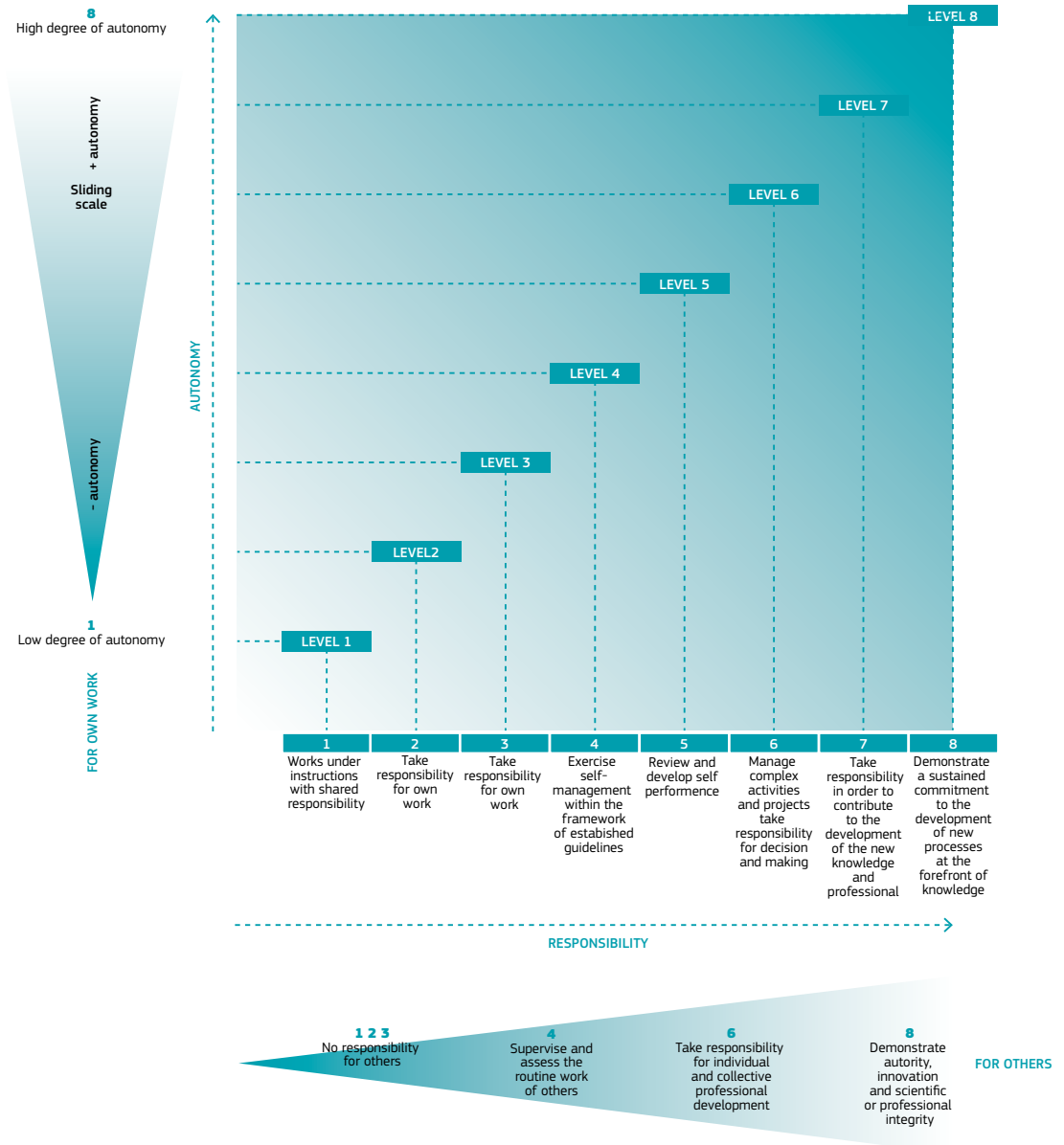
- (a) *There are no grounds for referencing SCQF level 1 to the EQF.*
- (b) *SCQF level 2 can be referenced to EQF level 1 only in some domains.
This partial matching was not typical of other levels. Considering the intention of the SCQF level and the extent to which referencing is not possible, it is agreed that SCQF level 2 should not be referenced to the EQF.*
- (c) *SCQF levels 3-6 can be confidently referenced to EQF levels 1-4.*
- (d) *For SCQF level 7, it is difficult to employ 'best fit' on the basis of an analysis of the descriptors alone. However, it is agreed that SCQF level 7 should be referenced to EQF level 5.*
- (e) *SCQF level 8 can be confidently referenced to EQF level 5.*
- (f) *While SCQF level 9 is intended to be more demanding than EQF level 5, it may not reference fully to EQF level 6 in terms of the language of the descriptors. It is agreed, however, that SCQF level 9 should be referenced to EQF level 6.*
- (g) *SCQF level 10 can be confidently referenced to EQF level 6.
SCQF levels 11 and 12 can be confidently referenced to EQF levels 7 and 8.*

Using the principle of 'best fit', SCQF levels can be referenced to EQF levels in terms of aims, descriptors and contents as shown below.

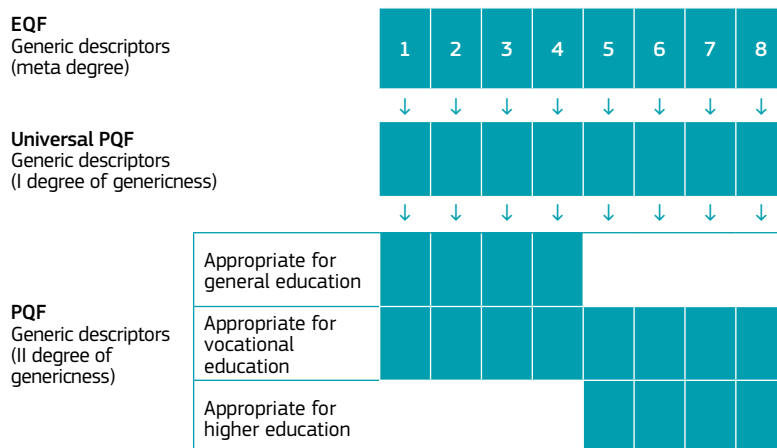
SCQF	EQF
12	8
11	7
10	6
9	6
8	5
7	5
6	4
5	3
4	2
3	1



Example of categories of NQF level descriptors in Portugal as referred to in [page 42](#). The competence category is better understood as 'attitudes': this category covers the aspects of autonomy and responsibility in the following way:

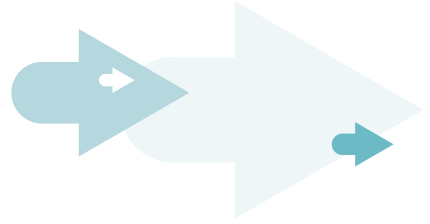


Example of the Polish Qualifications Framework descriptors, as mentioned in [page 42](#).



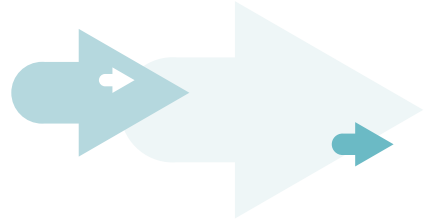
In the following table, the levels of detail are shown for the EQF and the provisional PQF at level 4.

	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope • Extent of understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving • Using knowledge in practice • Learning • Communicating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity • Cooperation • Responsibility
EQF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change. Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility • for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities.



	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
PQF Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadened basic general knowledge with elements of knowledge from a field of study and work • Understanding moderately complex dependencies between selected natural and social phenomena as well as in the area of the products of human thought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solving more complex and somewhat non-routine problems often under variable conditions • Completing more complicated tasks, partially without instruction often under variable conditions • Autonomous learning in a structured form • Formulating and understanding slightly more complex statement related to a broad range of issues; • Ability to use a foreign language to formulate and understand simple statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of what it means to responsibly participate in various communities and function in various social roles, as well as the obligations resulting therefrom • Acting and cooperating with others under conditions of extensive autonomy instructed conditions • Evaluating one's own activities and those of persons under one's direction: taking responsibility for the results of those activities
PQF general education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possesses broadened and in-depth knowledge in selected fields allowing education to be continued in a defined direction at an institution of higher education, as well as expanded knowledge for the understanding of: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has mastered compound and uncomplicated skills required to: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manifests readiness to:
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The structures and rules of formulating complex statements • ethical basis of verbal communication • The structures and rules of formulating simple verbal and written statements in a foreign language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consciously differentiate linguistic expressions • understand complex statements • analyse, select and link information from various sources • Formulate lengthier statements of varying character • Present and substantiate one's own opinion and discuss it in a group forum • Use a foreign language at the CEFR B1 level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect the ethical requirements of verbal communication • Withhold the expression on unsubstantiated opinions
Mathematics, other exact and natural sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not too complex mathematical strategies and models • Basic theories about the material world • Not too complex natural and technical phenomena and processes • Basic rules of drawing conclusions based on research results • Basic principles of sustainable development • Basic rules of recognising threats to safety, health and the environment and the ability to respond appropriately when threats appear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilise not too complex mathematical tools in many different situations • Conduct very simple experiments in the natural and technical sciences • Apply rules of safety, health and environmental protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abide by rules of safety, health and environmental protection and react when threats appear

	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Social functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factors influencing success in life and individual responsibility of one's decisions Basic mechanisms of the functioning of societies and the economy, also in the global dimension The significance and principles of dialogue and cooperation in establishing social order The significance and principles of social solidarity One's own identity connected to participation in various types of communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulate strategies leading to the achievement of success in various spheres of life Conduct dialogue and cooperate in partnership relationships while maintaining one's own identity Identify the needs of other persons and adequately respond to them Undertake autonomous learning and act autonomously in partly unknown and partly variable situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shape one's future while taking into account significant contexts Conduct dialogue and cooperate in partnership relationships Accept one's role in hierarchical structures as well as direct them Recognise the needs of other persons and respond to them Undertake autonomous learning (aside from organised educational classes) or autonomous activities
PQF vocational education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possesses theoretical and practical knowledge in a given vocational fields related to: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has mastered the skills of a given vocational field consisting of: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In relation to vocational tasks, manifests readiness to:
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concepts and terminology Phenomena and processes Utilised technologies Utilised organisational solutions Required regulations and procedures of workplace safety and hygiene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing not too simple information Autonomously developing simple instructions Making not too simple calculations related to the tasks being carried out Utilising documents Searching for and providing information to others also with the use of electronic media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complying with technological and organisational requirements Following developmental trends in a given vocational field Formulating the conditions for work according to work safety rules
Tools and materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic principles of the functioning of complex tools, devices and machines Characteristics and qualities of materials used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carrying out complex vocational activities with the use of appropriate tools and materials Operating work station equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carrying out complex vocational activities with the use of appropriate tools and materials Operating work station equipment
Cooperating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principles and methods of communicating in the professional community Basic principles and methods of leading a small work team Basic principles and methods of instructing and training at the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carrying out the complex instructions of supervisors Conducting a dialogue with clients and cooperants Directing small teams of employees Participating in meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume responsibility for individually implemented tasks React to opinions about the work carried out Assume responsibility for directing small work teams Discuss the work of a subordinate team and listen to workers Coordinate one's own work or that of a subordinate team consisting of other persons or teams



	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Processes – planning, implementing, evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principles of planning the manner of carrying out one's vocational tasks or directing a team Principles and methods of evaluating the implementation and results of one's own work being carried out or that of the team being directed Principles of professional ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparing a plan of carrying out one's own vocational tasks or those of a directed team Adapting a standard plan of action to circumstances Evaluating the economic aspects of the vocational tasks carried out diagnosing and resolving not too simple problems occurring while carrying out one's own vocational tasks or those of subordinate employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include improvements Make decisions about whether or not to carry out vocational tasks Proceed according to the ethical principles of the profession

The example of the FIRST project, as presented in [page 42](#).

	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
EQF Descriptor	Factual and theoretical knowledge in road contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
FSS EQF Translator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explains the key drivers, stakeholders and structures of the economy and the role of the financial intermediation process Explains the FS core business processes, practices and the related regulatory, legal and corporate governance requirements Describes in plain language a broad range of banking and financial products and services offered by own/other financial organisations and their benefits to the clients, as the basis for financial sales and advice processes Explains customer segmentation: types of clients and their resultant financial needs Identifies fundamental risks, risk management, principles and processes and explains his/her position within the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performs a needs analysis of clients putting it against the macro and microeconomic situation and translates those into an offer of adequate banking and financial products and services Analyses key factors influencing performance of a financial product Generates and communicates procedure-driven solutions, compliant with risk profile established by the organisation and the legal and regulatory requirements binding for the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates autonomy in applying relevant financial markets information to his/her own specific role Takes responsibility for being ethical, compliant and effective within the boundaries of his/her job, working independently or within a team Takes responsibility, within regulatory requirements, to meet clients' financial needs, without direct supervision Takes responsibility to capture problems, inefficiencies and opportunities for quality improvement within his/her work environment/team and to come up with appropriate solutions Performs well as a team member

European Commission

**Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF –
European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 5**

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

2013 — 76 pp. — 25.0 × 17.6 cm

ISBN 978-92-79-26563-1

doi:10.2766/40015

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The European Commission, in close cooperation with European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training and the European Training Foundation, publishes a series of EQF Notes in order to support discussions and activities related to the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) at national and European level.

The Recommendation of the Council and the European Parliament on the establishment of the EQF invites Member States to relate their national qualifications levels to the relevant levels of the EQF. The process, methodology and results of relating national qualification levels to the EQF must be understood and trusted by stakeholders in all countries involved.

EQF Note 5: Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF suggests ideas and advice to policy makers and experts involved in national referencing processes on how this referencing process can be organised and how its results can be presented in a demonstrable, explicit and defensible way. The note is based on discussions in the EQF Advisory Group and experiences from referencing processes up until now and may be further elaborated as information on forthcoming referencing processes becomes available.

