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## **European Qualification Framework (EQF) and its implementation**

**Prepared by**

**Theodhori Karaj, Gerda Sula and Rovena Sulstarova**

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It is a module in a series examining the role of education law in the modernisation of education systems in Europe. Information included in this module is gathered from the best contemporary publications and authors, while the cases are selected from the education systems of Albania, Belarus, Belgium, Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

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## **Learning outcomes**

- To understand the logic and need for developing a Framework on qualification and training in Europe and beyond
- To demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the legal framework that is relevant to EQF
- To understand the diversity of the national frameworks and their goal to bring them closer to a more unified European qualification network
- To analyse similarities and differences of the legal EQF.
- To analyze the different approaches of specific countries and their rationale in order to align education at level 5 with the labor market
- To analyze and prepare briefs of significant legal cases, case studies, secondary materials and classroom studies on implementation of EQF.

## **Introduction**

In this module, the focus will be on understanding the rationale behind the need for European countries to develop a Qualifications framework. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a European-wide qualifications framework which joins the qualifications of different EU members together. In a way, it is a translation of different national qualifications which makes qualifications in different EU countries easier to understand. The EQF aims to facilitate mobility of students and workers within the EU in order to encourage development mobile and flexible workforce throughout Europe and to help develop lifelong learning.

The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in April 2008 and then revised in 2017. The UK has completed the cross reference of its frameworks – the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) but so far, only a minority of the EU member countries decided to do the same. The EQF is voluntary and the member countries are not obliged to cross reference their frameworks but the number of completed cross references is expected to increase in the near future.

In this module we will explore the actual offers of EQF, as well as future opportunities and promises. The EQF enables the learners, learning providers and employers to compare qualifications between different national systems. This is thought to help increase mobility in the labor market within and between the countries because it makes it easy to determine a person's level of qualification which in turn will improve the balance between demand and supply of knowledge and skills.

We will analyze the scope and concept of EQF, as well as the opportunities to support the development of the individual countries' National Qualification Framework (NQF). The EQF is a lifelong learning framework and covers all types of qualifications ranging from those acquired at the end of compulsory education (Level 1) to the highest qualifications such as Doctorate (Level 8). It also includes vocational qualifications. The EQF consists of 8 levels which indicate the difficulty level and it is focused on the outcome of learning and the person's actual knowledge and skills rather than the amount of study needed to complete the qualification program.

We will also critically analyze the limits and the difficulties to incorporate the EQF in its full potential. The EQF is intended to provide information and facilitate comparison between different national qualification systems. But it will not:

- replace the national qualifications or require any adjustments;
- include or reference individual qualifications;
- have any regulatory role or power;
- have any qualification awarding functions or power;
- describe levels of qualifications in terms of outcome of learning.

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## **Chapter I. Conceptual framework of European Qualification Framework (EQF)**

### ***1.1. Aim of implementation of the EQF/NQF in fostering (labor) mobility and lifelong learning.***

The EQF is a common European reference framework acting as a translation device in comparing the qualifications and qualifications levels, in order to promote the labor market mobility between countries and as well as lifelong learning. The EQF is adopted by the European Parliament and Council in April 2008 (Official Journal of the European Union, C111, 6. 5. 2008) and the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017. The EQF is designed to act as a reference to different qualifications systems and frameworks in different countries in Europe. In this sense the EQF is a framework and it can therefore be defined as a “Meta-framework” (European Commission 2008, p. 4), which includes a reference level for all qualifications and all learning whatever route the learning takes. Countries, in an autonomous national process, are asked to link the levels of their national qualifications levels (in terms of diplomas, certificates) to the neutral reference defined by EQF.

The EQF purpose is to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems. Covering qualifications at all levels and in all sub-systems of education and training, the EQF provides a comprehensive overview qualification in all countries involved in its implementation. Once they have related their national frameworks to the EQF, the EQF will help individuals, employers and education and training providers compare individual qualifications from different countries and education and training systems. The EQF has been an inspiration for the development of national qualifications framework throughout different countries in the world. They are seeking closer links between their qualifications framework and the EQF.

### ***1.2. EQF as a reference to NQF qualification levels.***

The core of EQF is its eight levels defined in terms of learning outcomes: knowledge, skills, and autonomy-responsibility (Recommendation of the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council: 2017). Learning outcomes express what individuals know, understand and are able to do at the end of a learning process. Countries develop national qualifications framework (NQFs) to implement EQF.

The EQF recommendation uses the following as a definition of NQF: “A NQF means an instrument which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualification subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labor market and civil society.” With an NQF in place, national referencing can be achieved by referencing each NQF level to an EQF level. “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 qualification framework, and the levels of EQF” (Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF, European Commission 2013 pg 6). For any specific qualification, the national qualification system is the only concrete point of reference and it will be given an EQF level only if the national system has been officially referenced to EQF.

EQF includes all kinds and levels of qualifications, regardless of where learning has taken place. Through EQF is possible to compare qualifications levels in national qualifications systems of different countries. Learners who would like to start or continue their studies in another country would prefer that their skills and competences from their earlier qualifications to be recognized. Those the EQF provides a useful reference on the recognition of qualifications in educational and training institutions. This means that a specific country in the referencing process needs to make clear statements about the focus on lifelong learning and the means of achieving more of it. The same is for employers of the European labor market, which in describing the requirements and the skills level of employees will refer to the learning outcomes and the levels of the EQF (indicated in certificates, diplomas and Europass documents). This entire process will help learners and workers wishing to move between countries or change jobs or move between educational institutions at home.

## ***Conclusions***

The number, diversity and complexity of qualifications on offer is increasing to respond to the needs of learners. Work practices are also diversifying and becoming more complex, so labor market need for different types of qualifications. Some countries tend to introduce different market mechanisms by increasing competition and diversification among them. This explains why qualifications systems need reference points outside the institutions providing education and training. (Added value of national qualifications framework in implementing EQF, EQF series: note 2 p. 15) Therefore, the coordination national levels and EQF levels is not always over ground process and approximation is needful.

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## **Chapter II. Legislative framework of European Qualification Framework (EQF)**

### ***2.1 European legal documents on EQF***

The EQF was originally created by the Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning of the European Parliament and the Council on 23 April 2008, as a common reference framework of eight generic levels of learning, which serves as “translation device” between national qualifications systems.

Reflecting the success in implementing the 2008 recommendation, a revised and strengthened recommendation on the EQF was adopted on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2017 by the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council. The purpose of this amendment is to ensure the continuity as well as a further deepening of the EQF, to improve transparency, comparability and portability of people qualifications. All types and levels of qualifications are covered including qualifications from higher education, vocational education and training and general education, but also qualifications awarded by the private sector and international organizations.

### ***2.2 Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks and systems to the EQF***

In order to ensure that the referencing process is designed in such a way that it can be understood and trusted by all stakeholders in all countries involved, the EQF Advisory Group agreed on ten criteria/procedures to guide this process. These criteria aim to ensure that all the relevant information and the documentation given by countries is validated by the competent authorities, is relevant, is transparent, and can generate trust. The ten criteria revised by the Council recommendation 2017 are shown in the Annex 1 of this module.

Referring to the national qualification systems, different countries have different institutional structures. Based on criterion 1 of the Council recommendation (2017), it is important to determine all the bodies that have a legitimate role in the referencing process and to clarify their roles. Countries can relate their qualifications levels to the EQF without formally establishing a national framework. Based on criteria 2, 3 and 4, countries can refer to the EQF without formally establishing a NQF. The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the EQF and criterion 3 states that the national qualifications and its qualifications should be based on learning outcomes. This requirement provides a link to the mechanism and systems supporting transfer of qualifications, notably credit transfer systems and validation of non-formal and informal learning, but this link is non-mandatory and should reflect existing national practices.

The criteria 5 and 6 addresses quality assurance. Countries are asked to demonstrate the links between national quality assurance systems, NQFs and the overarching European agreements in this field, including a statement from the relevant quality assurance bodies that they agree with the documentation provided in the referencing process. The requirement foreseen in criteria 7, concerning the involvement of international experts in the referencing process and at least of two written statements of two international experts in the referencing reports, is for reasons of mutual trust, and not to national reforms. The involvement of external experts will increase the validity and transparency of the referencing.

Criteria 8 requires a certification of the referencing report by the competent national bodies, in order to ensure that countries cover all qualifications levels and types in their framework or system. While criteria 9, foresees the obligation of countries in publishing the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal, within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report.

Criteria 10 emphasizes that indicating an EQF level on a certificate would help stakeholders to judge the level of national qualifications and facilitate comparison of qualification from different systems.

### ***2.3 Quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications framework or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)***

Development of frameworks have played an important quality assurance role in the respective qualification systems. Procedures and criteria for allocating new qualifications to NQF levels, are

recognized trusted and often used by quality assurance bodies.  
The Council recommendation (2017) in its Annex IV stipulates as below:

“All qualifications with an EQF level should be quality assured to enhance trust in their quality and level. In accordance with national circumstances and taking into account sectoral differences, quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should<sup>1 2</sup>

- address the design of qualifications as well as application of the learning outcomes approach;
- ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards and address the process of certification;
- consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;
- involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;
- be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;
- be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;
- be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;
- be supported by appropriate resources;
- include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies, carrying out quality assurance;
- include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results.”

#### ***2.4 Principles for credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).***

The EQF and national qualifications frameworks or systems, by using the learning outcomes approach, should better support individuals when moving (i) between various levels of education and training; (ii) within and between sectors of education and training; (iii) between education and training and the labor market; and (iv) within and across borders. Without prejudice to national decisions to (i) make use of credit systems; and (ii) relate them to national qualifications frameworks or systems, different credit systems, where appropriate, should work together with national qualifications frameworks or systems to support transitions and facilitate progression. To this aim, credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems where appropriate, should respect the following principles:

- Credit systems should support flexible learning pathways, for the benefit of individual learners.
- When designing and developing qualifications, the learning outcomes approach should be systematically used to facilitate the transfer of (components of) qualifications and progression in learning.
- Credit systems should facilitate transfer of learning outcomes and progression of learners across institutional and national borders.
- Credit systems should be underpinned by explicit and transparent quality assurance.
- The credit acquired by an individual should be documented, expressing the acquired learning outcomes, the name of the competent credit awarding institution and, where relevant, the related credit value.
- Systems for credit transfer and accumulation should seek synergies with arrangements for validation of prior learning, working together to facilitate and promote transfer and progression.
- Credit systems should be developed and improved through cooperation between stakeholders at the appropriate national and Union levels. (Council Recommendation (2017)).

#### ***Conclusion***

The EQF Recommendation may be used as a tool for reforming education and training systems even

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<sup>1</sup> These common principles are fully compatible with the European standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and with European Quality assurance in VET (EQAVET).

<sup>2</sup> Depending on national circumstances, these principals may not apply to general education.

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its influence on policy developments remains soft. The EQF shall be used as a reference point for comparing qualifications. The existing referencing process and its criteria should ensure that EQF covers all kinds of qualifications, including international qualifications.

## **Chapter III. Comparative prospective of national legal documents National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) towards European Qualification Framework (EQF) and among NQF**

### ***3.1 Legislative overview and the EQF in a comparative perspective (National Qualification Frameworks)***

From historical perspective, countries with NQF are divided in two groups: first, the countries with NQF before 2005, when the EQF was introduced: France, Ireland and UK; second, the countries with NQF that were developed in close connection with EQF (38 countries until 2015). In the countries of the first group, the development of the NQF and the referencing process are clearly separate processes. Numbers of levels of NQFs and their learning outcomes descriptors differ from those of EQF. The countries of the second group have started the NQF development around the time of development and implementation of the EQF. Many of these countries have developed their NQF-s based on the EQF for classifying the existing system.

**1. Albania:** Albania has developed a NQF (AQF) with eight levels. A new law no. 10247 date 04. 03. 2010 “Albanian Qualification Framework” was approved, describing the main features of the AQF (structure, scope, objectives and functions), as well as arrangements for governance (Council), institutional management, quality assurance and financing. The AQF has 8 levels and includes all types and levels of qualifications and certification. The AQF law has no provisions for partial qualifications but the amendment of VET law (2011) states that *Curricula are modularized or unitized by learning areas so that learners can take these units separately, thus offering flexible options for different types of learners*. However, many clauses of this law have not been implemented yet. The AQF is described in the law as a comprehensive 8-level structure (figure 1 in the annex) that corresponds to the European Qualifications Framework. The Albanian VET and Qualifications agency NAVETQ compiles a National List of Vocational Qualifications that contains all vocational qualifications at the AQF levels 2, 3, 4 and 5. The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) is creating a national register of higher education programs. Each program will be coded according to the field of study. There is a coherent system of internal quality assurance for development, provision, assessment and certification of vocational qualifications in VET. But, an external validation for vocational qualifications does not yet exist. In addition to levels, the AQF uses *qualification types* to distinguish between groups of education programs/qualifications that are recognizable for Albanian stakeholders. Each qualification type is allocated to an AQF level. Examples of qualification types are: One-year program for technician/mid-managers/Vocational Certificate at AQF level 4; Two-year program for semi-qualified workers/Vocational Certificate at AQF level 2 and Bachelor at AQF level 6. Albania in principle has decided to implement a qualification framework, but has not yet reached a system in which such a framework has been defined in detail. The awareness of AQF in the country is still low, legal framework has to be improved; capacities and resources are needed to further develop outcome based qualifications, to systematize and register qualifications, and linking them to curricula, teaching materials, teacher training etc. The AQF referencing process with EQF is still missing.

**2. Belgium:** Belgium has developed three NQFs, linked to the Flemish, French and German speaking communities respectively. An amendment of to the Belgian federal law on general Structure of the Education System was adopted in 2012, stating that EQF levels will be used as a common reference for the three communities in Belgium. This means that the three NQFs shall be linked with each other in order to facilitate mobility of Belgian citizens within the country. The three frameworks will be referred separately to the EQF: The Flemish and French speaking communities have completed this process and the German-speaking community intends to do it in a near future.

**2.1 Flemish speaking community.** Belgium Flanders has adopted its NQF through the Act on Qualification Structure in 2009 (Government of Flanders, 2009). The qualification structure is a systematic classification of all qualifications recognized by the Flemish Government, on the basis of an all-round applicable framework. The qualification structure can also be used as a frame of reference to develop assessments for recognition of acquired competences and align procedures; and to provide direction and/or guidance in school careers. The Flemish qualifications framework is also split into 8 levels. The similarity between the EQF and Flemish Qualifications Frameworks is very clear. Both

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frameworks consist of 8 level descriptors, containing elements of knowledge, skills and competences. The Flemish qualifications framework provides a generic description of the characteristics of the competences that pertain to the qualifications at that level and comprises five descriptor elements: knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility. They determine the level of the qualification. The level descriptors are used to describe and classify both educational and vocational qualifications. There are, indeed, two types of qualifications (at each of the 8 levels): a) an educational qualification is based on a set of competences for a person to continue education and/or to exercise a professional activity. This qualification is acquired only through education and institution recognized by the Flemish authorities; b) a professional qualification is based on a set of competences allowing a person to exercise a profession and this can be achieved inside and outside education.

The Flemish qualification framework (FQF) is operational, following the adoption of a number of decrees in 2011-2013 covering educational and professional qualification. The FQF was referenced to the EQF in June 2011 (AKOV 2014). Since both frameworks were developed during the same period, the Flemish Qualifications Framework took into account the structure of the EQF, without necessarily aiming at the same structure and subdivision.

*2.2. French-speaking Community.* The French-speaking community of Belgium has developed a qualification framework for lifelong learning (*cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, CFC*). of eight levels structure. Its learning outcomes are based on the same descriptors of the FQF: knowledge, skills and context, autonomy and responsibility. The framework is seen as integral part of the existing education and training system and it intends to improve the transparency of qualifications, facilitate the mobility and support the learners' progress. It does not have a regulatory role and it is not foreseen as a device for reforming existing education structure and institution. In the first phase of implementation only qualification delivered by public providers will be included with the aim of opening up at a later stage to other qualifications (Malarme 2013).

Legal adoption of the CFC is still pending and actual qualifications have not yet been placed in the framework. An authority for the implementation of the CFC and its follow up will be established as soon as the legal adoption is carried out. The CFC was referenced to the EQF in December 2013.

*2.3 German-speaking community.* The German-speaking community adopted its qualification framework (*Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft, QDG*) in November 2013. As the smallest part of Belgium in terms of population, its framework reflects the achievements of the Flemish and French speaking parts of Belgium and in the same time is strongly inspired by the German Qualification Framework. It is based on eight level that includes qualifications from the general education, VET and higher education. It is mainly based on the action competence (*handlungskompetenze*). The location of this community raises possibilities for citizens to cross regional or national borders for learning and working purposes. That makes the priority to clarify the relation between own qualification and those awarding in the neighboring countries. The decree on QDG in 2014 define that a system of validation of non-formal and informal learning will be linked to the QDG, and a central validation point will be established in the next five years. The QDG has not been yet referenced to EQF.

**3. Belarus** In the Republic of Belarus Academic National Qualifications Framework is developed in 2015<sup>3</sup>. National Qualifications Framework of higher education in the Republic of Belarus (BelQF) is developed in 2016. The current legal status of the NQF is only provisional. On 17/01/2014 the Council of Ministers issued Decree No 34, *On some key aspects to develop the National Qualification systems* in order to test and develop new elements of the national qualifications system. The pilot NQF has eight levels that follow the EQF structure with three domain descriptors for learning outcomes for knowledge (theoretical and/or practical), skills (cognitive and/or practical) and the level of responsibility and degree of autonomy. Although the decree foresees as well the development of sector qualifications framework, the two pilot sectors have been using the draft NQF descriptors for defining the levels.

The necessary basis for National Qualifications Framework in the Republic of Belarus is developed and reflected in the project of the Code of the Republic of Belarus about education: Levels of

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<sup>3</sup> Order of Ministry of Education no. 628, date July 30, 2015

education are defined and coordinated with The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011; each level of education is described with the terms of the learning outcomes (competences); conditions of the educational levels' transition are defined (levels of the previous education); Terms of training (in credits points) are established according to the cycles of higher education.

**4. Lithuania** The Lithuanian Qualifications Framework (LTQF) has 8 qualification levels of qualifications which are arranged hierarchically, in accordance with the criteria defining qualifications' levels: complexity, autonomy and a range of activities which a person with certain qualifications can be expected to carry out. Like the EQF, the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework has 8 qualification levels, but their descriptions are different. The LQF is defined by The resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania on "Approving the description of the Lithuanian Qualification Framework" no. 535, 4 May 2010. After defining the LQF, a new version of the Law on Education was adopted by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania on 17 March 2011. On 24 August 2011, the second step was taken – the Government of the Republic of Lithuania by its Resolution No. 986 approved amendments to the LQF, upon introduction of which it is possible to base the referencing of the Lithuanian qualifications system to the EQF. Descriptors of the LQF qualifications levels approved by the Government decree Nr. 986 on 24 August 2011.

The Qualifications and VET Development Centre which is responsible for the implementation of the National Coordination Point functions, has been authorized by the Ministry of Education and Science to arrange the reference of the national qualifications system to the EQF. The implementation of the process commenced in 2010. The referencing process started in 2011 (Referencing the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area NATIONAL REPORT 2012). The referencing process involves the following national bodies: • National Coordination Point; • National institutions responsible for quality assurance in different education sectors; • Central Professional Committee.

**5. Poland.** Poland, since 2006, has developed a NQF (PQF) with eight levels, including all levels and types of qualification from general education, VET and higher education, based on skills, knowledge and social competences. From 2010, large project financed from ESF supporting developing assumptions on the PQF and qualifications register in Poland The framework is open to qualifications from the private and non-formal sectors with the condition to meet the quality criteria. Through developing the PQF, Poland aims to modernize the education and training system, to promote lifelong learning and respond better to labor market and social needs. Unlike many other Eastern European countries, the reform is mainly managed by the public sector ministries and other public institutions. Social partners and civil society representatives are included to a limited degree. The legal basis that make PQF operational is the adoption of the law on integrated qualifications, in December 2015. The law which covers PQF, a national register of qualifications and the role of validation, entered in force on January 2016. On July 2016 a qualification portal and the integrated register of qualification is launched. The register includes qualifications from general and higher education. Until December 2016, almost all relevant legal acts (including government decrees) are in place, first 5 requests to include non-statutory qualifications are being proceeded. The referring process of PQF to EQF and self-certified to the QF\_EHEA as a joint process was conducted in 2013 (Slawinski et al. 2013).

**6. The Russian Federation.** Russian federation has a NQF with nine levels. There is no separate law or decree on an NQF, but the Federal Law of 3 December 2012 N 236-Ф3, set out definitions of qualifications and occupational standards in the Labor Code and in the Law "On Technical Regulation". The regulation on an NQF has been approved by the Federal Labor Ministry, titled the Levels of Qualifications to Use in Developing Occupational standards. The NQF comprising qualifications levels for developing occupational standards was approved by Order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection No. 148n dated 12 April 2013. The NQF is a 9-level structure (the 9<sup>th</sup> level covers postdoctoral qualifications) and descriptors are similar to those of the European Qualifications Framework. A qualifications database is being developed. Russia is a member of the Bologna Process in higher education, joining in 2003 and so bound to implement the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. The leading institution of RNF is National Qualifications Council. The legislation on establishing the National Council for Qualifications

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(Presidential Decree No 249 of 16 April 2014) and Law on Independent Assessment of Qualifications are also relevant. Providers and other actors must comply with the Federal State Education Standards, or FSSES. For qualifications themselves, there is not much. Russia is at the structured stage. Laws are in place, but the NQF is not fully implemented. There is no qualifications database yet, and qualifications are not yet awarded with an NQF stamp.

### **3.2 Cross country analysis**

Development of NQFs demonstrate that visions and strategies for NQFs countries differ greatly. The differences in qualifications system means that there can be no single model for the referencing process. Each country has its own educational tradition, education policy priorities and institutional differences that lead to a unique approach to referencing. The creation of an NQF that meets national expectations may present a challenge in the referencing process. These main differences will require the application of the best-fit principle.

#### **3.2.1 Comparative perspective towards framework structure**

Several countries have differences in numbers of levels in their NQF to the eight used in the EQF. Most of countries including the countries of the module (Albania, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland and Belgium) use the eight level structure as EQF, except Russia federation which has a 9 levels structure (the 9<sup>th</sup> level covers postdoctoral qualifications). Some countries also use the same categories for the level descriptors but with varying definition, in a different way that are used for the EQF, in Poland for example the descriptor of competence is referred to social competence<sup>4</sup>.

NQFs reflect the different kinds of qualifications that exist in a country. Qualifications of one kind can be valued in one country and be absent from the provision in another.

“For example, the 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 level, 5 include a wide range of different qualifications (such 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 individual qualifications to EQF level 5 via referencing their national system or framework to EQF. In some countries, EQF level 5 does currently not include any qualifications” (CEDEFOP 2014, p. 43).

#### **3.2.2 Comparative perspective towards responsible bodies for the NQF**

According to the Albanian Qualification Framework law and based on the Decision of Council of Ministers No. 351, date 21. 04. 2011, on the “Functioning of the AQF Council”, a multi-stakeholder AQF Council manages the NQF, supported by a secretariat (unit). Council and secretariat have not been established. The AQF taskforce is currently redefining the management of the AQF.

In Russian Federation, overall responsibility for coordinating Russia’s NQF development, including supervision of the development of occupational standards, lies with the National Qualifications Council, which was established as an autonomous agency in April 2014. Another actor in this area is the National Agency for Qualifications Development that currently acts on behalf of the National Qualifications Council.

In Belarus, the leading role for the innovation project was with the Ministry of Labor, while the Institute of Labor was in charge with coordinating the implementation and preparing a proposal for the new National Qualification System. The implementation of the further development of the NQF is with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection in agreement with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Economy. For the Bologna Process the lead is with the Ministry of Education and stakeholders from the HE sector. An Advisory Group is assisting the Bologna Follow Up working

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<sup>4</sup> **Social competence** – the proven ability (in work, study situations and personal development) to use knowledge and skills within the context of an internalized system of values. The EQF describes social competence in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

Group in monitoring the implementation.

In Lithuania the referencing process involves the following national bodies: National Coordination Point; national institutions responsible for quality assurance in different education sectors; and Central Professional Committee which includes members from different stakeholders interested in the process. In 2009 the Flemish Government created the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming – AKOV). AKOV is appointed as the national coordination point for the European qualifications framework and therefore also for the referencing process. The agency is responsible to initiate and coordinate the process to reference the Flemish qualifications framework. To ensure the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the process, AKOV created an expert committee that guides and monitors the referencing process.

### **3.2.3 Comparative perspectives towards implementation**

In Belarus, the qualification framework structure has not been tested beyond the innovation project. A single register of the NQF is not yet foreseen. Existing qualifications are still regulated through different classifiers that are part of the Tariff Qualification System. There is not yet a special approach to ensure the quality of qualifications that are included in the NQF. QA systems are not fully in line with European standards (EQAVET/ ESG), but can built on related experiences. Belarus is in the initial stage.

The Albanian Qualification Framework Law has not been implemented and is currently under revision. An action plan for the implementation of the AQF is yet to be developed. The AQF Council is not yet operational. Principles and procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the AQF have yet to be developed and a Qualifications database to be established. Therefore, Albania is at the structuring stage. The same situation goes for Russia, which the national register and database are under development. Mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of the NQF's implementation have not yet been defined. So, Russia is in the structuring stage too.

The Lithuanian Qualification Framework has now entered an early operational stage. In preparation, work is being prioritized in a limited number of areas, notably qualifications in general and higher education. The need for increased consistency has been observed in both areas.

Unlike many other countries, the PQF and related work is mainly in the hands of the public sector, albeit with the participation of a broad range of stakeholders from ministries and other public institutions. PQF is fully operational but the future involvement of stakeholders from other sectors will be important for its ownership outside public administration. Meanwhile, the implementation of the Flemish Qualification Framework for professional qualifications can be considered successful. The framework was implemented and qualifications are put in place.

### ***Conclusions***

The way in which NQFs are set up differ from country to country. As indicated above, in most cases, the specific EQF levels were felt to be adapted to the systems of qualifications at national level. Differences are shown in implementing framework structure of EQF, and in implementation of the NQF in the respective country. Some country have an existing qualification authority in place responsible for NQF. Other keeps this role within the ministry of education who leads the referencing process, some delegate this role to ministry agencies etc. The extent of their involvement in the referencing process varies by country, depending on the structural and organizational aspects at national level described above. There are various structural, cultural and political dimensions that determine what kind of qualifications are included in national qualifications frameworks and at what stage of the NQF development.

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## Chapter IV. Diversity of approaches to the EQF level 5

### 3.1. *Hovering between general education, VET, higher education and the labor market*

The education and training systems are organized in a hierarchic manner in subsystems (general, vocational and higher education). In every country each subsystem has its own regulations and organization but EQF level 5 interferes among these subsystems by a mix of qualifications types under the responsibility of VET and higher education institutions. EQF level 5 qualifications aim to immediate employment, career advancement, and further learning. Their focus on advanced technical and managerial skills makes them valuable for labor market. EQF level 5 is used differently in national contexts.

EQF level 5 provides opportunities between higher education and VET education but meanwhile it represents a second choice for students who do not have access to academic routes, or had failed in it. A typical level 5 qualification is provided by a short-cycle higher education program but they can also be found both in VET and in general education. Half of qualification types of the level 5 are regulated by higher education. When focusing on the learning outcome of these qualifications, the difference between VET and higher education is unclear and connection between institutions and qualification types are looser. So, in Albania for example, VET higher education diploma is increasingly offered by higher education institutions as the basis of an (undergraduate) degree program.

The opportunities between higher education and VET are for the continuity and progression between levels 5 and 6. The Bologna process has made short-cycle higher education more visible but its integration into bachelor programs is still a work in progress. For example, in some countries such as Albania, learners holding qualifications at level 5 wish to access to bachelor programs, they are entitled to enroll without additional conditions. According to the bachelor program they are enrolled, they can transfer credits from the short cycle program to the bachelor program. In some other countries such as Belgium, students and learners are allowed to enroll in bachelor programs on the basis of their result in transition programs (of varying length).

### 3.2 *Overview of level 5 qualifications types in different countries*

For EQF 5 level qualifications there are two possible routes, the first being to use the qualification to enter a level 6; in this case the level 5 qualification is used to continue studying a bachelor program. The second possible route is to enter the labor market with a level 5 qualification. A typical level 5 qualification is provided by short-cycle higher education program. The provision of short cycle post-secondary education varies from country to country with no clearly distinct patterns.<sup>5</sup>

**Albania:** There are still few post-secondary vocational education and training programs available for upper secondary education graduates that provide the relevant qualifications to the labor market. Both the Vocational Education and Training Law and the Law on Higher Education provide for the possibility of universities and vocational education and training providers to offer post-secondary education and training programs. So far, all post-secondary programs – with one exemption – have been developed and implemented in the higher education sector. The public Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës has taken a leading role in promoting post-secondary programs in Albania. University ‘Aleksandër Moisiu’ Durrës has opened an applied sciences faculty with seven specialties (at 120 ECTS points) to bring Matura students to a qualified professional level. These professional study programs are non-university programs, after secondary education, with not less than 120 credits offered by public and private higher education systems, Their normal timeframe is 1-2 academic years and a “Professional Certificate/ Diploma” in the respective field of education is issued at the end of the programs<sup>6</sup> Currently, post-secondary programs are mainly targeted at: (a) graduates from general schools who cannot get to public university bachelor programs, who cannot afford private universities

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<sup>5</sup> In Croatia short-cycle tertiary education is at level 5B (vocational) and 5A (academic). In Croatia, level 5B is considered post-secondary non higher education, as in Germany, Austria and Hungary. While in the Netherlands, Ireland, France and Belgium (Flanders) level 5B is the first stage of higher education. On the other hand, the same education level in Cyprus, Malta, Norway, Sweden and the UK is known as a ‘sub-degree’ and is part of an integrated system that can eventually lead to a full degree.

<sup>6</sup> Law on Higher education in Albania

or who do not want to take up full first-cycle traditional Bachelor programs; and (b) graduates from vocational schools who want to complete a further VET qualification at an advanced level.

The Ministry of Education and Science favours three different models of post-secondary education and trainings: Model 1: Post-secondary programs with a strong vocational orientation but mainly academic driven. These programs are developed and implemented in universities/professional colleges.

Model 2: Post-secondary programs with a strong vocational orientation that require intensive practical training in workshops. These programs are developed by universities and/or NAVETQ and implemented in universities and vocational schools or multifunctional centres.

Model 3: Post-secondary programs that build upon initial vocational education programs like the 2+1+1 and the 2+2 programs offered by vocational schools. These programs will be developed by NAVETQ and implemented in vocational schools and/or multifunctional centres.

The 2-year Professional Diploma post-secondary programs currently run at the above mentioned professional colleges are equivalent in credit terms (120 European Credit Transfer points/ECTS) within the Bologna Framework to the first two years of a bachelor degree and allow for the progression into the third year of a bachelor program. Post-secondary programs are expected to focus on knowledge, skills and competencies that are needed on the labor market and to develop learning outcomes within the level five of the Albanian Qualification Framework.

**Flemish community in Belgium:** In addition to secondary education and (fulltime) higher education a level of higher professional education (HBO5) was implemented in September 2009. HBO5 is situated between secondary education and professional bachelor's degrees and has been named after the level of the Flemish Qualification Framework to which it corresponds. There are 2 streams of HBO5: a) Adult education, and b) Higher professional education in nursing. After obtaining the diploma, in some fields of study it is possible to continue higher professional education and obtain a bachelor's degree through a short study program. The program is modular which means that several modules will have to be completed (during 6 semesters) before the degree is obtained. The normal duration of the program is 3 years. On completion of the program the degree Diploma van Gegradueerde is obtained. The short cycle programs (HBO5) leading to an Associate degree (graduate) and offered by centres for adult education, university colleges and one program offered by secondary schools (Belgium case in the Annex I).

**Belarus:** Specialized secondary education: This educational level provides training in a specific field, and develops professional skills and competencies. This educational level offers programs that last for 2 to 4 years.

**Lithuania:** Level V qualifications shall be acquired by completing training programs intended for persons with a professional qualification as well as fixed-duration professional experience, higher education programs not leading to a degree (except residency) and/or through professional experience and independent study. Level 5, which is an interim level between vocational and higher education qualifications and which is acquired according to the programs of post-secondary education in VET institutions or according to short cycle study programs in colleges.

**Poland.** Characteristics of level 5 of the second degree were determined in the Regulation of the Minister of the National Education and the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 June 2016 on the characteristics<sup>7</sup> of the second degree of the Polish Qualifications Framework typical for qualifications obtained after the full qualification Level 4-Level 5. Types of qualifications on Level 5: full qualifications - education after completion of certain stages of education, and qualifications of a first, second and third degree within the meaning of the Act of 27 July 2005 - Law on Higher Education); and partial qualifications, which takes the form of qualifications in the profession as defined in the Education System Act, qualifications awarded after postgraduate studies and other forms of education, qualifications determined in separate regulations and market qualifications given by various types of entities. (Poland case in the annex I)

There are 39 registered qualifications on level 5 as of 10 September 2017 (18 full qualifications and 21 partial qualification). All of them are of a vocational character. Until now, level 5 is "empty" within the higher education system.

**Russian Federation:** The "Diplom o nepolnom vysshem obrazovanii" has a nominal duration of at

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<sup>7</sup> Characteristics of levels 1-8, including level 5, for qualification of a vocational character are determined in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 13 April 2016 on the characteristics of the second degree of the Polish Qualifications Framework for qualifications of a professional nature - levels 1-8.

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least 2 years and represents an intermediate qualification allowing entry into the labor market. In terms of level, this Diploma is comparable to 2 years of higher professional education (HBO) depending on the content of the program (Education System in Russia; 2015).

### ***3.3 Country differences in level 5 use***

“A qualification type is a group of titles/diploma and/or certificates within a country, sharing similar characteristics in terms of level, duration or related education pathway, and level of labor market entry. Within a qualification type, there can be different qualifications according to content” (Ibid. p. 28). According to this definition, depending on prevailing type of level 5 qualification, countries fall into 4 groups: i) countries where these qualifications are obtained outside the formal system: Czech Republic and Estonia; ii) countries with a single qualification type linked to level 5. Half of level 5 qualifications type are regulated by higher education system and delivered by higher education institutions (Belgium, (Flanders), Ireland, Latvia, Albania, or as Austria which has only vocational education and training linked with EQF level 5; iii) countries where higher education and vocational qualifications linked to level 5: Ireland, Croatia, Belgium (Flanders); iv) there is another category of countries which offer several options, sectorial, private and or general education qualifications (Ireland, France, Malta, UK). In addition, general education qualifications in Scotland are linked with level 5. In some countries, EQF level 5 qualifications might be recently introduced (Netherlands) and some others do not have qualifications linked to the EQF level 5, such as Poland or Lithuania (where students and learners have to start bachelor programs from the beginning, without recognition of what they have done in other programs) (Ibid. p. 1).

### ***Conclusions***

EQF level 5 qualifications play an important role in providing access to employment and career advancement, as well as enabling further learning and progression to higher education. This double function makes them attractive to learners and employers. Although the extent to which countries use qualifications at EQF level 5 differs, their importance is growing in all countries investigated for several reasons. First, they are developed as a response to increased needs for advanced technical and/or management skills in a rapidly changing labor market and ageing workforce. Second, the data show that EQF level 5 qualifications are especially attractive to students with vocational education and training (VET) backgrounds and those already in employment. They contribute to lifelong learning by being accessible and attractive for adults and non-traditional learners. Third, they are seen as valuable and relevant by employers, as most include some form of work-based learning.

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## Annexes

### **Annex I Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**

1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.
3. The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.
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.
5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this recommendation.
6. The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.
7. The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.
8. The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.
9. Within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.
10. Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

### *Cases for the Module*

#### Albania Case law

Post-secondary study program on Energetic Efficiency has been opened with Ministry Order No. 315, date 21.07.2014 “On opening the first cycle Bachelor Program at the Architecture and Design Faculty, and the post-secondary study at the Planning, environment and urban management Faculty at the POLIS University (private HEI). This post-secondary professional program is offered in a part-time mode with two years’ duration, with 120 ECTS by the end of which a Professional Diploma on Energetic Efficiency is issued. During the accreditation procedure of this education program, the internal evaluation group noticed that was a lack of HBO5 quality assurance standards in the Quality assurance Code.<sup>8</sup> The Agency of Ensuring the Quality instructed the Internal Evaluation Committee to write the report based on the state quality standards for the first cycle of Bachelor studies. The Internal Evaluation Group, the External Evaluations Committee used the success indicators of the first cycle of studies Bachelor. The program was accredited positively based on this indicators

#### Belgium Case

The decree of 30 April 2009 laid down a Flemish qualification structure. The qualification structure is a systematic classification of all qualifications recognized by the Flemish Government, on the basis of an all-round applicable framework. The Flemish qualifications framework is also split into 8 levels. The Flemish qualifications framework provides a generic description of the characteristics of the competences that pertain to the qualifications at that level and comprises five descriptor elements: knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility. They determine the level of the qualification. The level descriptors are used to describe and classify both educational and vocational qualifications. Level 5: o final objectives of Higher Vocational Education courses (HBO5, ASSOCIATE DEGREE) o one or more recognized vocational level-5 qualifications. AKOV, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training concentrates amongst other things on the quality and transparency of EVC pathways. Cooperation within the EVC field of action is very important here.

#### Belarus Case

In the Republic of Belarus Academic National Qualifications Framework is developed in 2015<sup>9</sup>. National Qualifications Framework of higher education in the Republic of Belarus (BelQF) is developed in 2016. BelQF is based on EQF-EHEA and describes the following levels and stages of the current national education system: the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of higher education, the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of higher education (Master’s Degree), the 1<sup>st</sup> stage (post-graduate education) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage (doctorate). The necessary basis for National Qualifications Framework in the Republic of Belarus is developed and reflected in the project of the Code of the Republic of Belarus about education: Levels of education are defined and coordinated with The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011; each level of education is described with the terms of the learning outcomes (competences); conditions of the educational levels’ transition are defined (levels of the previous education); Terms of training (in credits points) are established according to the cycles of higher education.

#### Poland Case

Characteristics of level 5 of the second degree were determined in the Regulation of the Minister of the National Education and the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 June 2016 on the characteristics<sup>10</sup> of the second degree of the Polish Qualifications Framework typical for qualifications obtained after the full qualification Level 4 - Level 5. Types of qualifications on Level 5: full qualifications - education after completion of certain stages of education, and qualifications of a first,

<sup>8</sup> Order of the Minister of Education and Sciences no. 75 date 19.02.2013 “On approving the state quality standards for evaluation and accreditation of programs”.

<sup>9</sup> Order of Ministry of Education no. 628, date July 30, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Characteristics of levels 1-8, including level 5, for qualification of a vocational character are determined in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 13 April 2016 on the characteristics of the second degree of the Polish Qualifications Framework for qualifications of a professional nature - levels 1-8.

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second and third degree within the meaning of the Act of 27 July 2005 - Law on Higher Education); and partial qualifications, which takes the form of qualifications in the profession as defined in the Education System Act, qualifications awarded after postgraduate studies and other forms of education, qualifications determined in separate regulations and market qualifications given by various types of entities.