



The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)

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THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING (EQF)



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Education and Culture

Lifelong Learning: Education and Training policies
Coordination of Lifelong Learning Policies



The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)

The EQF is a common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.

The Recommendation formally entered into force in April 2008. It sets 2010 as the recommended target date for countries to relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF, and 2012 for countries to ensure that individual qualification certificates bear a reference to the appropriate EQF level.

The EQF will relate different countries' national qualifications systems and frameworks together around a common European reference – its eight reference levels. The levels span the full scale of qualifications, from basic (Level 1, for example school leaving certificates) to advanced (Level 8, for example Doctorates) levels. As an instrument for the promotion of lifelong learning, the EQF encompasses all levels of

qualifications acquired in general, vocational as well as academic education and training. Additionally, the framework addresses qualifications acquired in initial and continuing education and training.

The eight reference levels are described in terms of learning outcomes. The EQF recognises that Europe's education and training systems are so diverse that a shift to learning outcomes is necessary to make comparison and cooperation between countries and institutions possible.

In the EQF a learning outcome is defined as a statement of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. The EQF therefore emphasises the results of learning rather than focusing on inputs such as length of study. Learning outcomes are specified in three categories – as knowledge, skills and competence. This signals that qualifications – in different combinations – capture a broad scope of learning outcomes, including theoretical knowledge, practical and technical skills, and social competences where the ability to work with others will be crucial.

Background to the EQF's development – where did the EQF come from?

The development of the European Qualifications Framework started in 2004 in response to requests from the Member States, the social partners and other stakeholders for a common reference to increase the transparency of qualifications.

The Commission, with the support of an EQF Expert Group, produced a blueprint proposing an 8-level framework based on learning outcomes aiming to facilitate the transparency and portability of qualifications and to support lifelong learning. The Commission published this for consultation across Europe during the second half of 2005.

The responses to the consultation demonstrated widespread support among European stakeholders for the Commission proposal but also requested a number of clarifications and simplification. In response, the Commission amended the proposal, drawing on the input of experts from all the 32 countries involved as well as the European social partners. The revised text was then adopted by the Commission as a proposal on 6 September 2006. The European Parliament and Council successfully negotiated the proposal during 2007, leading to the EQF's formal adoption in February 2008.

What benefits does the EQF provide for Europe?

The Recommendation will establish a common European reference which will link the various national qualifications systems together and so facilitate greater communication between them. A network of independent but related and mutually understandable qualifications systems will thereby be created.

Using learning outcomes as a common reference point, the Framework will facilitate comparison and transfer of qualifications between countries, systems and institutions and will therefore be relevant to a wide range of users at European as well as at national level.

Most European countries have decided to develop National Qualifications Frameworks reflecting and responding to the EQF. These developments are important to ensure that the European-level cooperation process is properly anchored at national level. The rapid development of NQFs since 2004 demonstrates the need for increased transparency and comparability of qualifications at all levels and shows that the basic principles underpinning the EQF are broadly shared.

This closer relationship between countries' qualifications systems will have many beneficiaries:

- The EQF will support greater mobility of learners and workers. It will make it easier for learners to describe their broad level of competence to recruiters in other countries. This will help employers interpret the qualifications of applicants and so support labour market mobility in Europe. At a very practical level, from 2012 all new qualifications should bear a reference to the appropriate EQF level. The EQF will thus complement and reinforce existing European mobility instruments such as Europass, Erasmus, and ECTS.
- The EQF should benefit individuals by increasing access to, and participation in, lifelong learning. By establishing a common reference point, the EQF will indicate how learning outcomes may be combined from different settings, for example formal study or work, and from different countries,

and can thus contribute to reducing barriers between education and training providers e.g. between higher education and vocational education and training, which may operate in isolation from each other. This will promote progression so that learners do not have to repeat learning for example.

- The EQF can support individuals with extensive experience from work or other fields of activity by facilitating validation of non-formal and informal learning. The focus on learning outcomes will make it easier to assess whether learning outcomes acquired in these settings are equivalent in content and relevance to formal qualifications.
- The EQF will support individual users as well as providers of education and training by increasing transparency of qualifications awarded outside the national systems, for example by sectors and multinational companies. The adoption of a common reference framework based on learning outcomes will facilitate the comparison and (potential) linking together of traditional qualifications awarded by national authorities and qualifications awarded by other stakeholders. The EQF will thus help sectors and individuals take advantage of this growing internationalisation of qualifications.

The EQF is an ambitious and far-reaching instrument which has implications for education and training systems, the labour market, industry and commerce and citizens.

More information is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/index_en.html

RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL

of 23 April 2008

on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and in particular Article 149(4) and Article 150(4) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the Commission,

Having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee¹,

Having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions²,

Acting in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 251 of the Treaty³,

¹ OJ C 175, 27.7.2007, p. 74.

² OJ C 146, 30.6.2007, p. 77.

³ Opinion of the European Parliament of 24 October 2007 (not yet published in the Official Journal) and Council Decision of 14 February 2008.

Whereas:

- (1) The development and recognition of citizens' knowledge, skills and competence are crucial for the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion in the Community. Such development and recognition should facilitate transnational mobility for workers and learners and contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market. Access to and participation in lifelong learning for all, including disadvantaged people, and the use of qualifications should therefore be promoted and improved at national and Community level.
- (2) The Lisbon European Council in 2000 concluded that increased transparency of qualifications should be one of the main components necessary to adapt education and training systems in the Community to the demands of the knowledge society. Furthermore, the Barcelona European Council in 2002 called for closer cooperation in the university sector and improvement of transparency and recognition methods in the area of vocational education and training.
- (3) The Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning⁴ invited the Commission, in close cooperation with the Council and Member States, to develop a framework for the recognition of qualifications for both education and training, building on the achievements of the Bologna process and promoting similar action in the area of vocational training.
- (4) The joint reports of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "Education and Training 2010" work programme, adopted in 2004 and 2006, stressed the need to develop a European Qualifications Framework.
- (5) In the context of the Copenhagen process, the conclusions of the Council and the representatives of the governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 15 November 2004 on the future priorities of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training gave priority to the development of an open and flexible European Qualifications Framework, founded on transparency and mutual trust, which should stand as a common reference covering both education and training.
- (6) The validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes should be promoted in accordance with the Council conclusions on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning of 28 May 2004.
- (7) The Brussels European Councils of March 2005 and March 2006 underlined the importance of adopting a European Qualifications Framework.
- (8) This Recommendation takes into account Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)⁵ and Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning⁶.
- (9) This Recommendation is compatible with the framework for the European Higher Education Area and cycle descriptors agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education in 45 European countries at their meeting in Bergen on 19 and 20 May 2005 within the framework of the Bologna process.
- (10) The Council conclusions on quality assurance in vocational education and training of 23 and 24 May 2004, Recommendation 2006/143/EC of

⁴ OJ C 163, 9.7.2002, p. 1.

⁵ OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p. 6.

⁶ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10.

the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education⁷ and the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education at their meeting in Bergen contain common principles for quality assurance which should underpin the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework.

- (11) This Recommendation is without prejudice to Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications⁸, which confers rights and obligations on both the relevant national authority and the migrant. Reference to the European Qualifications Framework levels on qualifications should not affect access to the labour market where professional qualifications have been recognised in accordance with Directive 2005/36/EC.
- (12) The objective of this Recommendation is to create a common reference framework which should serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels, whether for general and higher education or for vocational education and training. This will improve the transparency, comparability and portability of citizens' qualifications issued in accordance with the practice in the different Member States. Each level of qualification should, in principle, be attainable by way of a variety of educational and career paths. The European Qualifications Framework should, moreover, enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to a common European reference point and thus show the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems. This Recommendation therefore contributes to the wider objectives of promoting lifelong learning and increasing the

employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners. Transparent quality assurance principles and information exchange will support its implementation, by helping to build mutual trust.

- (13) This Recommendation should contribute to modernising education and training systems, the interrelationship of education, training and employment and building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning, leading also to the validation of learning outcomes acquired through experience.
- (14) This Recommendation does not replace or define national qualifications systems and/or qualifications. The European Qualifications Framework does not describe specific qualifications or an individual's competences and particular qualifications should be referenced to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level by way of the relevant national qualifications systems.
- (15) Given its non-binding nature, this Recommendation conforms to the principle of subsidiarity by supporting and supplementing Member States' activities by facilitating further cooperation between them to increase transparency and to promote mobility and lifelong learning. It should be implemented in accordance with national legislation and practice.
- (16) Since the objective of this Recommendation, namely the creation of a common reference framework serving as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels, cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of the scale and effects of the action envisaged, be better achieved at Community level, the Community may adopt measures, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty. In accordance with the principle of proportionality as set out in that Article, this Recommendation does not go beyond what is necessary in order to achieve that objective,

⁷ OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60.

⁸ OJ L 255, 30.9.2005, p. 22. Directive as amended by Council Directive 2006/100/EC (OJ L 363, 20.12.2006, p. 141).

HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT MEMBER STATES:

1. use the European Qualifications Framework as a reference tool to compare the qualification levels of the different qualifications systems and to promote both lifelong learning and equal opportunities in the knowledge-based society, as well as the further integration of the European labour market, while respecting the rich diversity of national education systems;
2. relate their national qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework by 2010, in particular by referencing, in a transparent manner, their qualification levels to the levels set out in Annex II, and, where appropriate, by developing national qualifications frameworks in accordance with national legislation and practice;
3. adopt measures, as appropriate, so that, by 2012, 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;
4. use an approach based on learning outcomes when defining and describing qualifications, and promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accordance with the common European principles agreed in the Council conclusions of 28 May 2004, paying particular attention to those citizens most likely to be subject to unemployment or insecure forms of employment, for whom such an approach could help increase participation in lifelong learning and access to the labour market;
5. promote and apply the principles of quality assurance in education and training set out in Annex III when relating higher education and vocational education and training qualifications within national qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework;
6. designate national coordination points linked to the particular structures and requirements of the Member States, in order to support and, in conjunction with other relevant national authorities, guide the relationship between national qualifications systems and the European Qualifications Framework with a view to promoting the quality and transparency of that relationship.

The tasks of those national coordination points should include:

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

ENDORSE THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

1. support Member States in carrying out the above tasks and international sectoral organisations in using the reference levels and principles of the European Qualifications Framework as set out in this Recommendation, in particular by facilitating cooperation, exchanging good practice and testing – inter alia through voluntary peer review and pilot projects under Community programmes, by launching information and consultation exercises with social dialogue committees – and developing support and guidance material;
2. establish, by 23 April 2009, a European Qualifications Framework advisory group composed of representatives of Member States and involving the European social partners and other stakeholders, as appropriate, responsible for providing overall coherence and promoting transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework;
3. assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, the action taken in response to this Recommendation, including the remit and duration of the advisory group, and, by 23 April 2013, report to the European Parliament and to the Council on the experience gained and implications for the future, including, if necessary, the possible review and revision of this Recommendation;
4. promote close links between the European Qualifications Framework and existing or future European systems for credit transfer and accumulation in higher education and vocational education and training, in order to improve citizens' mobility and facilitate the recognition of learning outcomes.

Done at Strasbourg, 23 April 2008.

For the European Parliament
The President
HANS-GERT PÖTTERING

For the Council
The President
JANEZ LENARČIČ

ANNEX I

Definitions

For the purposes of the Recommendation, the definitions which apply are the following:

- (a) “qualification” means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards;
- (b) “national qualifications system” means all aspects of a Member State’s activity related to the recognition of learning and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. This includes the development and implementation of institutional arrangements and processes relating to quality assurance, assessment and the award of qualifications. A national qualifications system may be composed of several subsystems and may include a national qualifications framework;
- (c) “national qualifications framework” means an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society;
- (d) “sector” means a grouping of professional activities on the basis of their main economic function, product, service or technology;
- (e) “international sectoral organisation” means an association of national organisations, including, for example, employers and professional bodies, which represents the interests of national sectors;
- (f) “learning outcomes” means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence;
- (g) “knowledge” means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual;
- (h) “skills” means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments);
- (i) “competence” means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

ANNEX II

Descriptors defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

Each of the 8 levels is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications.

		Knowledge
		In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.
Level 1	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 1 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic general knowledge
Level 2	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 2 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study
Level 3	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 3 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study
Level 4	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 4 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study
Level 5*	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 5 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge
Level 6**	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 6 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles
Level 7***	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 7 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research • critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields
Level 8****	The learning outcomes relevant to Level 8 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields

Skills	Competence
In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).	In the context of EQF, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic skills required to carry out simple tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work or study under supervision with some autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study • adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
<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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change • review and develop performance of self and others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts • take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches • take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Compatibility with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area provides descriptors for cycles. Each cycle descriptor offers a generic statement of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of that cycle.

- * The descriptor for the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle), developed by the Joint Quality Initiative as part of the Bologna process, corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 5.
- ** The descriptor for the first cycle in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005 in the framework of the Bologna process corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 6.
- *** The descriptor for the second cycle in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005 in the framework of the Bologna process corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 7.
- **** The descriptor for the third cycle in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005 in the framework of the Bologna process corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF level 8.

Common Principles for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training in the context of the European Qualifications Framework

When implementing the European Qualifications Framework, quality assurance – which is necessary to ensure accountability and the improvement of higher education and vocational education and training – should be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- Quality assurance policies and procedures should underpin all levels of the European Qualifications Framework.
- Quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions.
- Quality assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions, their programmes or their quality assurance systems by external monitoring bodies or agencies.
- External monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance should be subject to regular review.
- Quality assurance should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.
- Quality assurance systems should include the following elements
 - clear and measurable objectives and standards;
 - guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement;
 - appropriate resources;
 - consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;
 - feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement;
 - widely accessible evaluation results.
- Quality assurance initiatives at international, national and regional level should be coordinated in order to ensure overview, coherence, synergy and system-wide analysis.
- Quality assurance should be a cooperative process across education and training levels and systems, involving all relevant stakeholders, within Member States and across the Community.
- Quality assurance orientations at Community level may provide reference points for evaluations and peer learning.

European Commission

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