



## BRIEFING NOTE

# The hidden potential of level 5 qualifications

European qualifications framework (EQF) levels reveal what a learner knows, understands and can do at the end of a learning experience. Thanks to the comprehensive nature of the EQF, these learning outcomes can also provide policy-makers with a fine mesh of data about each particular level and every kind of qualification. Nowhere is this mesh more intricate than at level 5, where learning outcomes cut across several subsystems. Moreover, these qualifications serve to test the degree of permeability between subsectors of our education and training systems.

## Wide spectrum, dynamic presence

EQF level 5 qualifications appeal to learners as they open up prospects on several fronts – immediate employment, career advancement, and further learning. At the same time, their focus on advanced technical and managerial skills makes them valuable to employers.

### Box 1. Learning outcomes at EQF level 5

**Knowledge**

*Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge*

**Skills**

*A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems*

**Competence**

*Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others*

Source: Recommendation on establishment of the EQF. Official Journal of the European Union, C111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.

In fact, when examining level 5 qualifications based on learning outcomes, their complexity and diversity is greater than previously assumed and plays a more significant role in the labour market and for further

learning. But where they fit within education and training is not always clear. Some are classified as ISCED 5B while others come under ISCED 4. There is evidence that qualifications outside the formal education and training system have not been included in formal education statistics <sup>(1)</sup>. The Bologna process has made short-cycle higher education more visible but its integration into bachelor programmes is still a work in progress. Finally, level 5 qualifications' position in relation to initial vocational education and training is of critical importance and requires further investigation.

This institutional invisibility hides a plethora of dynamic qualifications. A typical level 5 qualification is provided by short-cycle higher education programmes such as the French *brevet de technicien supérieur* (BTS). Yet about 50% of qualifications at EQF level 5 are found outside this 'typical' institutional setting, in initial and continuing vocational education and training, general education, or entirely outside the formal education and training system.

This more accurate picture <sup>(2)</sup> indicates the true weight of these qualifications in the labour market and demonstrates how policy-makers can use the EQF and NQFs to identify gaps in their education and training systems.

## Variety of level 5 qualifications in Europe

Countries fall into four groups, depending on the prevailing type of level 5 qualification.

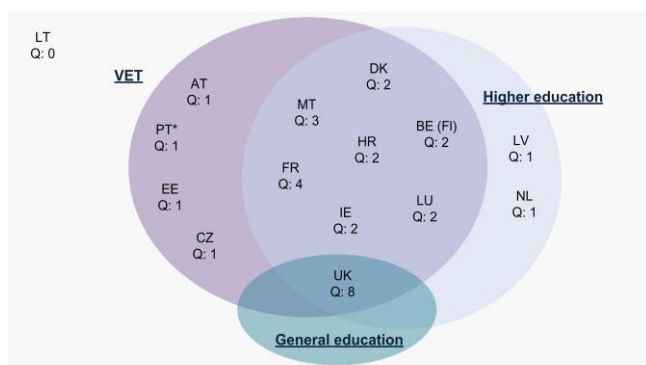
- (a) Countries where these qualifications are obtained outside the formal system: Czech Republic and Estonia;

<sup>(1)</sup> ISCED 1997.

<sup>(2)</sup> Cedefop (2014). *Qualifications at level 5: progressing to a career or to higher education*. The study focused on the 15 countries that had completed referencing (linking) their national qualification levels to the EQF by June 2012: Belgium (Flanders), Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, France, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, the United Kingdom (Scotland and England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI)).

- (b) Countries with a single qualification type linked to level 5: Latvia and the Netherlands (short-cycle higher education): Austria (vocational education and training);
- (c) Higher education and vocational qualifications linked to level 5: Denmark, Belgium (Flanders), Luxembourg, and Croatia;
- (d) Countries offering several options. In France, Ireland, Malta, UK, they include sectoral, private and/or general education qualifications.

Figure 1. Overview of qualification types



Q: number of qualifications types.  
 \*: PT – the qualification is governed by the VET system, but programmes are provided by higher and non-higher education institutions.

Source: Cedefop (2014): Qualifications at level 5.

### EQF level 5 within national qualifications systems

As shown in Figure 1, Lithuania lacks level 5 qualifications. Discussions with employers, however, have revealed a need for such qualifications, especially for master craftsmen/women, technicians and supervisors. Policy-makers are currently setting up legal conditions for introduction of level 5 qualifications.

Conversely, in France level 5 qualifications have a long history and attract large numbers of learners. In the past three years numbers of students following *brevet de technicien supérieur* (BTS) studies have increased from 240 322 in academic year 2009/10 to 245 750 in 2011/12. The public sector remains the dominant provider of BTS, although its relative weight in providing this type of qualification has fallen slightly from 67.1% in 2009/10 to 66.5% in 2011/12.

Level 5 qualifications were recently introduced in the Netherlands, where policy-makers decided to keep careful track of all learners who enter them. As a result, the Netherlands now has an excellent overall view of who these learners are – for instance, how

many are adult learners, or come from higher education – and what happens next: whether learners typically go into employment or on to further education and how likely they are to do both.

#### Box 2. Examples of qualifications linked to EQF level 5

##### Denmark

Academic professional degree in logistics management, for students who completed Danish upper secondary education or a previous vocational training programme within trade and office administration (short-cycle higher education).

##### Ireland

Advanced certificate in agriculture for future farmers and skilled workers in agro-industry. People completing this course can also work in farm management, environmental management and monitoring, agro-industry, sales and marketing, and quality control.

##### Luxembourg

BTS (specialised) assistant de direction for aspiring director's assistants. Short-cycle higher education, primarily preparation for employment.

Master craftsman's diploma/brevet de maîtrise. This is required for several trades and can be pursued after completing a vocational qualification (DAP – vocational aptitude diploma). Holders of this qualification may set up their own businesses and take on apprentices, in accordance with statutory provisions on business establishment and the apprenticeship system. An example is the *brevet de maîtrise boulanger-pâtissier/Bäcker* (continuous vocational education and training).

##### The Netherlands

Associate degree in small business and retail management, aims at retail and fast-food employees interested in becoming managers (short-cycle higher education).

##### Portugal

Diploma de especialização tecnológica / technological specialisation diploma (DET) in quality, environmental and safety management. Introduced into the national qualifications catalogue (NQC) in September 2012. Various points of delivery.

**UK (Scotland)** Advanced higher chemistry degree, developing theories of chemistry and practical skills used in the laboratory, developing knowledge of advanced chemistry as well as skills of independent study and thought (general education).

Source: Cedefop, *ibid.*

Figure 2. **Previous activity of level 5 learners in the Netherlands**

Activity	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Directly from HAVO (Dutch qualifications framework/ EQF level 4)	9%	6%	5%
Directly from MBO (Dutch qualifications framework/ EQF level 4 or level 3)	29%	20%	24%
Failed in bachelor	21%	17%	20%
Employment (less than three years)	13%	13%	11%
Employment (more than three years)	28%	41%	37%

Source: Cedefop, *ibid*, adapted from de Graaf and van de Berg, 2011.

**Ireland** provides an example of what can happen when different qualifications – advanced certificate and higher certificate – are available at the same level. The two cooking qualifications at EQF level 5 are of different origin (vocational/academic), serve different target audiences, and are accepted differently by employers. But the comprehensive description of both awards in terms of learning outcomes has made higher education providers more open to vocational graduates progressing onto programmes leading to a higher NQF level. The country's move towards a single entity for qualifications and quality assurance (namely, Quality and Qualifications Ireland) is expected to improve visibility of higher vocational qualifications, and allow smoother transitions between different educational sectors.

## Policy challenges

The above examples illustrate how level 5 qualifications can function as a bridge between educational sectors, allowing learners to enrich their educational and professional profiles from varied sources.

By the same token, level 5 qualifications respond to several challenges Europe currently faces:

- (a) Cedefop's skills forecast <sup>(3)</sup> showed a growing need for advanced technical and managerial skills. These are precisely the skills level 5 qualifications cover, helping people improve their job prospects and change or progress in their careers;
- (b) as they combine labour market orientation with progression opportunities to/within higher education, learners see them as offering more options than 'closed' vocational pathways;
- (c) conversely, they demonstrate the importance of vocationally- and professionally-oriented qualifications in tertiary, higher education and training;
- (d) qualifications at level 5 are accessible to adult and non-traditional learners and thus are a boon to lifelong learning <sup>(4)</sup>;
- (e) in many countries, access to programmes and qualifications at level 5 can be acquired through validation of work experience and non-formal and informal learning;
- (f) they are seen as valuable and relevant by employers, especially as most include some form of work-based learning;
- (g) by offering specialisation geared to the labour market they attract people with higher education degrees, as in Denmark. This illustrates that progression is not a one-way street – it can take many directions, from higher to vocational education, from one form of vocational training to another, from work to specialised education and back;
- (h) despite efforts to the contrary, in several countries the 'image' of vocational education and training's shows little sign of improvement; higher education is still held in greater esteem <sup>(5)</sup>. Demonstrating VET's value at all qualification levels could help people see vocational pathways as opening rather than restricting professional and educational options.

<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop (2012). *Future skills supply and demand in Europe: forecast 2012*. Latest update published March 2014. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/forecasting-skill-demand-and-supply/skills-forecasts/main-results.aspx?CountryID=32&case=ETBQ>.

<sup>(4)</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/index_en.htm).

<sup>(5)</sup> Cedefop (2014). *Attractiveness of initial vocational education and training: identifying what matters*, p.12.

## Value for policy-makers

When evaluated based on learning outcomes, the richness of level 5 qualifications can be particularly useful for policy-makers. Examining how this level is used in the labour market and in further learning can reveal gaps in provision of qualifications, question perceived opinion on relative merit of qualifications, improve education and training subsystems, and strengthen links between them.

Specifically, exploring different types and purposes of qualifications at EQF level 5 can help policy-makers determine whether their own qualifications landscape lacks options which combine labour-market and higher education appeal. They can thus use level 5 as a platform for developing new qualifications, as has already happened in Lithuania and Estonia. The process of assigning qualifications to a specific EQF level can lead to discussion about the relative value of diverse qualifications for the labour market and for further learning, and change how some of them are perceived and assigned. This improves transparency within each national system and between countries.

Policy-makers could also usefully monitor and study people who take these qualifications to determine their backgrounds, career goals and educational purpose. Understanding to whom such qualifications are attractive enables policy-makers to target particular groups. By way of example, once it is clear that level 5 qualifications are very attractive to adults and VET students, policy-makers can use these qualifications to help these groups stay in or return to education, to add to or update their skills. Thus, level 5 qualifications can provide excellent 'second chance' prospects for adults. They can also allow students with vocational backgrounds to pursue further learning. All in all, level 5 qualifications are ideal for continuous professional development.

Policy-makers may also rethink what kind of data to collect on level 5 qualifications. Lack of comparable data across the EU means it is currently difficult to assess how important this level is in terms of learners, qualifications awarded and study programmes available. Indicative data presented in Cedefop's analysis of level 5 qualifications can provide suggestions for defining and collecting comparable data in the future.

Because of the wide spectrum of routes through which people can acquire these qualifications – higher education, sectoral vocational training, adult education, and initial and continuing vocational education and training – level 5 also encourages development of validation procedures and makes subsystems more open to one another. This responds to common European goals on education and training: to recognise all forms of learning and achieve permeability between subsystems.

Qualifications continue to be linked, in the public mind, with particular types of institutions, and are still usually evaluated based on input. In a qualification level as diverse as this, it would be useful to examine issues of quality assurance in assessment, validation and certification, to ensure that all qualifications, whatever the context, correspond to the standards of this level. Achieving public perception of agreed standards will go a long way towards all forms of learning being equally valued.

## Further information

Cedefop (2014). *Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to higher education*.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/23886.aspx>

Qualifications site on Cedefop portal:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/european-qualifications-framework/index.aspx>



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