



# Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

Final Report

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**Study Supporting the Evaluation  
of the Council Recommendation of  
22 May 2017 on the European  
Qualifications Framework for  
Lifelong Learning**

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Manuscript completed in July 2023

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024

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PDF ISBN: 978-92-68-07695-8

doi: 10.2767/708989

KE-04-23-931-EN-N

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## Executive Summary

This independent, external study supports the European Commission in the evaluation of [Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning](#) (2017 EQF Recommendation). It includes an assessment of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value, as well as assessing the actions and progress made by the main actors targeted by the Recommendation, and gathering feedback from a broad range of stakeholders. The study covers the period from 1 June 2017 to 1 June 2022, and focuses on the provisions of the revised 2017 EQF Recommendation.

The study covers all 38 countries involved in the EQF process<sup>1</sup>, including 27 EU Member States (MS); the four EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland); five candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Türkiye); and potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo<sup>2</sup>). The study also considers the United Kingdom during the period until the entry into force of the Withdrawal Agreement (1 February 2020). In addition, the study considers how the EQF has contributed to the better permeability of qualifications between EQF countries and non-EQF third countries (countries not participating in the EQF).

The methods used in the study are as follows:

- **Exploratory interviews**, to support the fine-tuning of evaluation questions, identify key stakeholders, inform the questionnaire for the targeted online survey and public consultation, and to identify key themes for the case studies.
- **Mapping and desk research**, to provide an overview of the state of implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (mapping the state of play in 2017 and the progress of implementation across the 38 participating countries and at EU level), and review existing knowledge.
- **A targeted online survey**, (hereafter, “the survey”) to gather experiences, opinions and suggestions regarding the 2017 EQF Recommendation from stakeholders involved in the implementation of the EQF, as well as those benefitting from it.
- **Interviews**, which explored reflections on the Recommendation at European level. These interviews focused exclusively on the EU/International dimension, and exploring developments with regard to the EQF in greater depth, including governance, coherence and added value.
- **Case studies**, which provided a more detailed analysis of 10 selected provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation across 15 selected EQF participating countries, providing reflections on the various national contexts that might influence the implementation and effectiveness of the Recommendation.
- **Public consultation**, to gather opinions from a broad range of stakeholders – in particular, those with less direct involvement in the EQF implementation process, and from active users of the EQF.

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<sup>1</sup> Three countries were invited to join the EQF process after June 2022 (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). Thus, they are considered non-EQF countries for the purposes of this study.

<sup>2</sup> The designation XK / Kosovo is used without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

- **A validation workshop**, which engaged key EQF stakeholders to discuss and validate the study's conclusions and the lessons learned, as well as to gather ideas on the link between the EQF and qualifications.

## Implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

The specific provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation have, **to a large extent, been implemented effectively by stakeholders at European and national levels.** When reviewing the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its effectiveness, it is important to consider the continuity it provides from the earlier 2008 EQF Recommendation. The 2017 EQF Recommendation seeks to strengthen the approach established by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, while seeking to streamline and formalise practices and trends that have emerged through cooperation between countries and stakeholders. A total of 17 out of its 18 specific provisions can to some extent be linked to work that began before 2017. Such continuity exists either as an immediate continuation of earlier progress (e.g. by supporting the consistent use of learning outcomes, making information available about the levels of qualifications); formalising existing practices (e.g. on referencing, updating referencing reports, development of a system of credits); or fine-tuning existing provisions (e.g. opening up to qualifications from outside the formal system, linking qualification databases to the QDR (Qualifications Dataset Register)). The one remaining new provision focuses on the development of criteria/procedures that would enable comparisons with qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries. Even here, the work undertaken already builds on activities and pilot projects initiated by the EQF Advisory Group (AG) prior to 2017. Below, the study presents in greater detail what has been achieved under each of the Recommendation's provisions.

- **Strengthening the implementation of the EQF:** the 2017 EQF Recommendation continued the same approach to referencing taken since 2008, which continues to be seen as a vital instrument (although time-intensive) for critical reflections and engagement with stakeholders in the EQF AG. Given that the number of updates since 2017 is in line with expectations, it can be concluded that the introduction of a formal provision calling for updates to referencing in the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been implemented effectively. However, without fixed criteria to determine the need for such updates, Member States (MS) themselves need to take the initiative of re-referencing. For this reason, it will be important in the coming years to monitor whether the number of updates follows the extent to which national qualifications systems evolve over time.
- **Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning:** A review of developments between 2017 and 2022 provides evidence that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been somewhat effective in encouraging better links to qualifications outside the formal education and training system. Even where the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not explicitly recommend that EQF countries expand the comprehensiveness of their national frameworks and systems, the EQF provides an overarching framework and supports broader developments in that direction. Developments to include non-formal qualifications are observed more often in countries that possess more mature qualifications systems. Around half of EQF countries have NQFs that are not open to non-formal qualifications. However, even within this group, work is ongoing to some extent, or qualifications outside the formal domain can be linked to NQFs through validation arrangements.
- **Linking common principles to NQFs:** The common principles on quality and credit systems introduced by the 2017 EQF Recommendation were found to have added limited new provisions in comparison to the 2008 EQF Recommendation. Even where the 2017 EQF Recommendation has not had a direct effect on the principles of quality assurance in practice, existing referencing work and the structures

developed for NQFs are already perceived as contributing to trust in the quality of qualifications. Also with regard to the credit systems linked to NQFs, the study observed only marginal changes to the ways in which credit systems are organised and linked to NQFs as a result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The majority of countries with credit systems linked to NQF had done so prior to 2017.

- **Availability and accessibility of information on qualifications:** all MS with referenced NQFs now present EQF levels on certain types of qualification documents. This provides evidence of the effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as it represents a considerable improvement on the situation prior to 2017. Broader effects can be observed in terms of the accessibility of information about qualifications and their learning outcomes, which can be linked to the implementation of the provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Beyond core information concerning the content/level of qualifications, broader EQF/NQF communication activities undertaken at EU level and by EQF countries themselves have helped to raise awareness about the EQF since 2017. However, challenges remain with regard to reaching end beneficiaries and measuring what communication activity is most effective, and to what extent.

## Results and impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (effectiveness)

The **2017 EQF Recommendation continued a journey of improvement in the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications**, initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation (Specific Objective 1). Further improvements to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications have been reported across the board, as a result of the continued framework for European cooperation on qualifications, structured by the new and updated provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Crucial developments that underpin such impacts, such as the referencing criteria, horizontal comparisons and studies, all predate 2017 and have been kept as provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The stakeholders surveyed (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) and interviewed (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) were largely optimistic about the Recommendation's effectiveness in terms of the transparency and comparability of qualifications, both within and between countries. The case studies carried out for this study also highlight the fact that respondents are often unable to distinguish clearly between the achievements of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the 2017 EQF Recommendation – or, indeed, national reforms that have helped to modernise education and training in their respective countries.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation has also **contributed to facilitating lifelong learning (Specific Objective 2), by helping to further strengthen the establishment of the EQF between 2017 and 2022; however, further potential remains to reduce barriers to lifelong learning more actively in the future**. The outcomes of the Recommendation in facilitating lifelong learning are not visible in terms of significantly improved rates of participation in lifelong learning (i.e. no significant increase can be seen between 2017 and 2021). However, a positive effect can be seen in terms of the Recommendation's contribution to encouraging national reforms that aim to improve conditions for adults to learn. Since 2017, all of the NQFs studied have become more comprehensive in terms of the number of levels they cover. Improvements can also be seen in terms of the number of education and training sectors covered (all but six NQFs now cover all formal education and training sectors), as well as in the increased openness of some NQFs to qualifications offered outside formal education and training systems. Considerable scope remains for further improvements with regard to links to qualifications beyond the formal system in the future.

At national level, the **EQF and NQFs have helped to inspiring the modernisation of education and training systems by encouraging critical national reflections and**

**policy development in relation to qualifications, education and training systems (Wider Objective 1).** First, reforms identified by the study include the development or renewal of NQFs and related measures, such as the generalisation of the use of learning outcomes, the introduction of modularisation and validation mechanisms, or the introduction of new qualification types. Second, several countries have launched reform activities since 2017 that aligned well with the 2017 EQF Recommendation's call to promote the employability, mobility and social integration of learners and workers. Such measures include the development of new funding mechanisms for lifelong learning, or closer coordination between education providers and the labour market. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be linked to such national reforms, the drivers of these reforms tend to be more deeply rooted in national contexts Recommendation (e.g. demographic change, youth unemployment, skills gaps, increasing social inequalities etc.) and are not directly related to the EQF. The impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be seen more often as a factor in helping to reflect on specific characteristics or developments, through its comparative work and the insights gained into other systems.

**The gathered evidence does not allow concluding on a direct impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers (Wider Objective 2).** Such developments are impacted by many factors, and are only indirectly related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, without a visible causal relationship. However, the link between the 2017 Recommendation and national improvements in relation to (youth) employability and social integration can be seen through its informing of possible reforms that could ultimately lead to measurable changes in the individual behaviours of learners and workers.

### **Costs of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation (efficiency)**

**The costs of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation are limited and are outweighed, to a large extent, by its benefits.** Such costs can be identified in relation to the implementation of specific provisions of the Recommendation at national level (setting up qualification registers; linking the levels of EQF/NQF to all qualifications in these registers; conducting communication and outreach activities), as well as through each country's participation in the AG. At European level, such costs cover the provision of expertise by the Commission, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF), as well as coordinating the work of the AG and running its meetings and activities. The benefits, meanwhile, are expressed qualitatively and include advances in the understanding of qualifications systems across Europe; an increase in trust as result of EQF participant countries working together; through the exchange of views and experiences; as well as by reviewing the (updates to) referencing. These benefits are diffuse and cannot be expressed in monetary terms, and are thus difficult to specifically compare against costs. Nevertheless, given the relatively limited nature of these costs, such benefits appear valuable – as confirmed by stakeholders in various consultation activities. Stakeholders perceive certain other, additional costs at national level, but these related only indirectly to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and depend predominantly on the national specificities in the development of their NQFs.

In terms of governance, **the current composition of stakeholders represented in the EQF AG is adequate; the work of the EQF AG can be considered efficient, as its working methods are generally effective and perceived well by its members.** Some further improvements could, however, be made to stimulate greater interaction during meetings and more exchange between National Coordination Points NCPs. Meanwhile, the efficiency of the work carried out by Cedefop and the ETF to support and contribute to the implementation of the EQF is perceived well by stakeholders, mainly consisting of public authorities (including EQF AG members and NCPs) and international qualifications experts. Lastly, NCPs have been established to support the further development of NQFs. The dissemination of information to stakeholders in the field of education and training is sufficient, but dissemination to the wider public could be strengthened.



## Internal and external coherence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (coherence)

**The provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation are found to be internally coherent with its objectives.** The Recommendation offers a clear and coherent ambition to increase the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe and to facilitate lifelong learning, and the defined policy actions recommended to MS align coherently with these ambitions. The study finds no internal contradictions when assessing individual actions suggested in the 2017 EQF Recommendation against the relevant objectives, nor when reviewing actions in their entirety against the overall framework of objectives. The broad scope of the 2017 EQF Recommendation's objectives are an explanatory factor in this coherence, as they offer multiple pathways for the implementation of the objectives, all of which contribute to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications, and to building trust and understanding in the qualifications systems of other countries.

At the core of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is the further implementation of the EQF as an eight-level framework for qualifications. As such, the Recommendation **plays an important role in supporting other policy initiatives at international, European national levels.** Moreover, these other policy initiatives also strengthen the position of the EQF as a central reference framework within the broader European context. In particular, the EQF functions as a 'translation device', enabling the comparison of qualifications from a range of different systems and backgrounds, and thus constitutes an important building block that coherently enables other initiatives at EU level to achieve their objectives. In the survey and the public Consultation (PC), stakeholders (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) also reported that regarded the 2017 EQF Recommendation as being fully coherent with EU and national-level instruments and policy initiatives. A more in-depth review of such instruments carried out for this study identified important complementarities and did not find any sources of incoherence. The EQF works to increase transparency and comparability regarding the supply side of skills (qualifications), which complements other initiatives that focus on the demand side, such as the development of European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications (ESCO) to provide a common language on occupations and skills in the labour market.

## EU added value of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

Achieving the aims of increased comparability and transparency of qualifications in Europe, as supported by the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation, **would not have been possible without European-level action** – of which the 2017 EQF is a key instrument. The EQF provides a common point of reference for the development of NQFs. It has established a common language and structure to describe and compare qualifications, which facilitates both better comparability and greater transparency of qualifications between countries. These aims would have been impossible to achieve by each MS acting alone at national level, because qualifications, as well as education and training systems, vary greatly between countries. Thus, without cooperation at European level, it would be difficult to compare and recognise qualifications between countries. However, the contributions made by the EQF cannot be attributed solely to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but also reflect those efforts undertaken as a result of the 2008 EQF Recommendation.

## Relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

The context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted has changed significantly since 2017, due to various social and economic developments and EU policy initiatives that have altered the landscape surrounding qualifications across the EU and beyond in the years up to 2022. In many countries, **ageing societies** have increased the

share of the older population remaining in the labour market and placed pressure on education systems to up-skill and re-skill workers<sup>3</sup>. The **twin green and digital transitions** also bring new challenges, resulting in shifts in the skills required in the labour market<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, many countries participating in the EQF are affected by the continuing **influx of migrants**, inflated recently by the unprecedented inflow of people fleeing Ukraine, which has tested the adaptability of education and training systems, and places at the forefront the recognition of foreign qualifications in the European labour market<sup>5</sup>. In addition, wider EU policy initiatives adopted since 2017 have changed the policy context within which 2017 EQF Recommendation is being implemented. These include a focus on fostering the automatic recognition of qualifications<sup>6</sup>; increasing mobility among Vocational Education and Training (VET) learners<sup>7</sup>; developing a European framework for the standardised, integrated and transparent publishing of data on skills and qualifications;<sup>8</sup> and providing more flexible learning opportunities through introduction of micro-credentials<sup>9</sup> and individual learning accounts.<sup>10</sup> The macro-trends and wider EU policy developments mentioned above have also changed the needs of EQF stakeholders. Among respondents to the survey and PC, as well as stakeholders consulted for the country case studies, **digital transition and migration are believed to be the key macro-trends** altering their needs and potentially requiring changes to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. With regard to policy changes, the emergence of micro-credentials is seen as the key development affecting EQF stakeholder needs. **In view of the significant changes to the context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted, and subsequent changes in the needs of EQF stakeholders, the relevance of the 2017 Recommendation's objectives has only increased.** This is confirmed by respondents to the survey and PC (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), as well as stakeholders consulted for the country case studies.

**The relevance of implementing certain provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation has remained unchanged (even increased), but the manner of implementation has to be adjusted to respond to stakeholder needs. The evidence gathered also suggests that no changes are needed to the legal text and general structure and framework of the EQF.** According to respondents to the survey and PC (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), as well as different groups of stakeholders consulted for the country case studies<sup>11</sup> are needed in the implementation of communication and outreach about the EQF to the wider public, in order for it to remain relevant. Such improvements apply to areas such as the information collected for qualification documents, supplements and databases/registers; common procedures for levelling international qualifications; the facilitation of comparisons with qualifications from non-EQF third countries; the structure of the EQF reference framework; and common principles of quality assurance.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: European Commission (2020), European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change.

<sup>4</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council (COM(2022)289) "2022 Strategic Foresight Report. Twinning the green and digital transitions in the new geopolitical context": <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0289&qid=1658824364827>

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the ETF conversation on this topic: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/achieving-fair-recognition-migrants-qualifications> and Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 of 5 April 2022 on the recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554&from=EN>

<sup>6</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, pp. 1-16

<sup>7</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, pp. 1-16

<sup>8</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42-50.

<sup>9</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10-25.

<sup>10</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 26-34.

<sup>11</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries.

## Lessons learned

**Further work in implementing the EQF and NQFs is needed** to build a framework that offers practical added value for learners, workers and employers. Continuing work at European level as well as joint actions by MS can facilitate such a framework, which should be linked to other European and national initiatives. The following lessons learned can be used to support work on the EQF in this direction in the future:

1. Secure and maintain trust in the referencing of NQFs to the EQF and in national levelling decisions [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness*]:
2. Continue encouraging MS to develop comprehensive NQFs covering all levels, as well as more education and training systems, and ensure they are open to qualifications offered outside the formal education and training systems. [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness and relevance*]
3. Launch a comprehensive and well-informed discussion leading to a common approach regarding how NQFs (and the EQF) can incorporate smaller qualification units (such as micro-credentials), and identifying what the implications might be of providing level indications to micro-credentials. [*Lesson learned in relation to relevance*]
4. Continue work on common qualification descriptions to arrive at more consistent descriptions of learning outcomes across education systems and countries, to support better take-up and use of the EQF by learners, workers and employers. [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness*]
5. Further integrate the EQF with other developments and initiatives that are closer to the user, while improving communication that explains the EQF levels for practical use. [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness and coherence*]

The following additional lessons learned could be considered to support this work and to further improve the organisational and governance aspects of the EQF:

6. Further improve the working methods of the EQF AG, allowing more interaction and stimulating exchange between NCPs. [*Lesson learned in relation to efficiency*]
7. Continue working within the framework of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and stimulate implementation through specific notes and further linking of the EQF to other European initiatives. [*Lesson learned in relation to efficiency and coherence*]

## Résumé analytique

Cette étude externe indépendante vise à soutenir la Commission européenne dans l'évaluation de la [recommandation du Conseil du 22 mai 2017 concernant le cadre européen des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie](#) (recommandation CEC de 2017). Elle comprend une évaluation de l'efficacité, de l'efficience, de la pertinence, de la cohérence et de la valeur ajoutée européenne, en évaluant les actions et les progrès réalisés par les principaux acteurs visés par la recommandation, et en recueillant les réactions d'un vaste éventail de parties prenantes. L'étude couvre la période allant du 1<sup>er</sup> juin 2017 au 1<sup>er</sup> juin 2022 et se concentre sur les dispositions de la recommandation révisée du CEC de 2017.

L'étude couvre les 38 pays impliqués dans le processus du CEC<sup>12</sup>, dont les 27 États membres de l'UE, les quatre pays de l'AELE (Islande, Liechtenstein, Norvège et Suisse), cinq pays candidats (Albanie, Macédoine du Nord, Monténégro, Serbie et Turquie) et les pays candidats potentiels (Bosnie-Herzégovine et Kosovo<sup>13</sup>). L'étude prend en compte le Royaume-Uni pour la période courant jusqu'à l'entrée en vigueur de l'accord de retrait (1<sup>er</sup> février 2020). En outre, l'étude examine comment le CEC a contribué à une meilleure perméabilité des certifications entre les pays participant au CEC et les pays tiers (pays qui ne participent pas au CEC).

Les méthodes utilisées dans l'étude sont les suivantes :

- **Des entretiens exploratoires** visant à affiner les questions d'évaluation, identifier les principales parties prenantes, alimenter le questionnaire de l'enquête en ligne ciblée et de la consultation publique, et identifier les principaux thèmes des études de cas.
- **Cartographie et recherche documentaire** afin de fournir une vue d'ensemble de l'état de la mise en œuvre de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 (cartographie de l'état de la situation en 2017 et des progrès de la mise en œuvre dans les 38 pays participants et au niveau de l'UE) et d'examiner les connaissances existantes.
- **Enquête en ligne ciblée** (ci-après : l'enquête) visant à recueillir les expériences, les opinions et les suggestions concernant la recommandation du CEC de 2017 auprès des parties prenantes participant à la mise en œuvre du CEC, ainsi que de celles qui en bénéficient.
- **Des entretiens**, qui ont permis d'examiner les réflexions au niveau européen sur la recommandation. Ces entretiens ont porté exclusivement sur la dimension européenne/internationale et ont examiné de manière plus approfondie les évolutions du CEC, y compris ce qui concerne la gouvernance, la cohérence et la valeur ajoutée.
- **Des études de cas** ont fourni une analyse plus détaillée de dix dispositions sélectionnées de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 dans 15 pays participants au CEC, reflétant les contextes nationaux susceptibles d'influencer la mise en œuvre et l'efficacité de la recommandation.
- **Une consultation publique ouverte** (ci-après : CPO) afin de recueillir les avis d'un vaste éventail de parties prenantes, en particulier de celles qui participent moins

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<sup>12</sup> Trois pays ont été invités à rejoindre le processus du CEC après juin 2022 (l'Ukraine, la Moldavie et la Géorgie). Ils sont donc considérés comme des pays non soumis au CEC dans cette étude.

<sup>13</sup> La désignation XK / Kosovo est sans préjudice de la position sur le statut et est conforme à la résolution 1244 du Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies et à l'avis de la CIJ sur la déclaration d'indépendance du Kosovo.

directement au processus de mise en œuvre du CEC et des utilisateurs actifs du CEC.

- **Un atelier de validation** qui a réuni les principales parties prenantes du CEC afin d'examiner et de valider les conclusions de l'étude et les enseignements tirés, ainsi que de recueillir des idées sur le lien entre le CEC et les certifications.

## La mise en œuvre de la recommandation du CEC de 2017

Les dispositions spécifiques de la recommandation CEC de 2017 ont, dans une **large mesure, été mises en œuvre effectivement par les parties prenantes aux niveaux européen et national**. Lors de l'examen de la mise en œuvre et de son efficacité, il est important de tenir compte de la continuité qu'elle offre par rapport à la précédente recommandation sur le CEC de 2008. La recommandation du CEC de 2017 vise à renforcer l'approche établie par la recommandation du CEC de 2008 tout en cherchant à rationaliser et à formaliser les pratiques et les tendances qui ont émergé de la coopération entre les pays et les parties prenantes. Au total, 17 des 18 dispositions spécifiques peuvent être reliées, dans une certaine mesure, à des travaux antérieurs à 2017, qu'il s'agisse de la poursuite immédiate de progrès antérieurs (par exemple, le soutien à l'utilisation cohérente des acquis d'apprentissage, la mise à disposition d'information sur les niveaux de certification), de la formalisation de pratiques existantes (par exemple, sur le référencement, la mise à jour des rapports de référencement, le développement d'un système de crédits) ou de l'affinement de dispositions existantes (par exemple, l'ouverture aux certifications en dehors du système formel, le lien entre les bases de données de certifications et le QDR (registre des ensembles de données de qualification)). La nouvelle disposition restante est axée sur l'élaboration de critères/procédures qui permettraient de comparer les cadres de certification des pays tiers non dotés d'un CEC. Même dans ce cas, le travail entrepris s'appuie déjà sur des activités et des projets pilotes lancés par le groupe consultatif du CEC (AG) avant 2017. Ci-dessous, l'étude présente plus en détail ce qui a été réalisé grâce à chacune des dispositions de la recommandation.

- **Renforcer la mise en œuvre du CEC** : la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC a maintenu l'approche adoptée depuis 2008 en matière de référencement et qui continue d'être considérée comme un instrument essentiel, bien qu'exigeant beaucoup de temps, pour les réflexions critiques et l'engagement des parties prenantes dans l'AG CEC. L'introduction d'une disposition formelle appelant à des mises à jour du référencement dans la recommandation CEC de 2017 a été mise en œuvre de manière efficace, étant donné que le nombre de mises à jour depuis 2017 est conforme aux attentes. Toutefois, en l'absence de critères fixes déterminant la nécessité de ces mises à jour, les États membres doivent eux-mêmes prendre l'initiative de procéder à un nouveau référencement. Cela signifie qu'il sera important, dans les années à venir, de vérifier si le nombre de mises à jour suit l'évolution des systèmes nationaux de certification au fil du temps.
- **Encourager les liens entre l'apprentissage formel, non formel et informel** : L'examen des évolutions entre 2017 et 2022 montre que la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC a été quelque peu efficace pour encourager de meilleurs liens avec les certifications en dehors du système formel d'éducation et de formation. Même lorsque la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC ne recommande pas explicitement aux pays membres du CEC d'étendre l'exhaustivité de leurs cadres et systèmes nationaux, le CEC fournit un cadre général et soutient des évolutions plus larges en ce sens. Les évolutions visant à inclure les certifications non formelles sont plus souvent observées dans les pays dont les systèmes de certification sont plus matures. Environ la moitié des pays membres du CEC disposent de CNC qui ne sont pas ouverts aux certifications non formelles. Toutefois, même au sein de ce

groupe, des travaux sont en cours dans une certaine mesure, ou les certifications non formelles et informelles peuvent être reliées aux CNC par le biais de modalités de validation.

- **Lier les principes communs aux CNC** : il a été constaté que les principes communs sur la qualité et les systèmes de crédit introduits dans la recommandation du CEC de 2017 ajoutent peu de nouvelles dispositions par rapport à la recommandation du CEC de 2008. Le travail de référencement existant et les structures mises en place pour les CNC sont déjà perçus comme contribuant à la confiance dans la qualité d'une certification, même si la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC n'a pas d'effet direct sur les principes d'assurance de la qualité en pratique. En ce qui concerne les systèmes de crédits liés au CNC, l'étude a également observé des changements marginaux dans la manière dont les systèmes de crédits sont organisés et liés aux CNC à la suite de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC. La majorité des pays dont les systèmes de crédits sont liés aux CNC l'étaient déjà avant 2017.
- **Disponibilité et accessibilité des informations sur les certifications** : Tous les EM de l'UE disposant d'un CNC référencé présentent désormais les niveaux du CEC sur certains types de documents de certification. Cela prouve l'efficacité de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC, car il s'agit d'une amélioration considérable par rapport à la situation qui prévalait avant 2017. Des effets plus larges peuvent être observés en termes d'accessibilité de l'information sur les certifications et leurs résultats d'apprentissage, qui peuvent être liés à la mise en œuvre des dispositions de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC. Au-delà des informations de base sur le contenu et le niveau des certifications, des activités de communication plus larges sur le CEC/CNC menées au niveau de l'UE et par les pays participant au CEC eux-mêmes ont contribué à mieux faire connaître le CEC depuis 2017. Cependant, des difficultés persistent pour atteindre les bénéficiaires finaux et pour mesurer les activités de communication les plus efficaces, et dans quelle mesure.

## **Les résultats et l'impact de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 (efficacité)**

La recommandation CEC de 2017 a poursuivi l'amélioration de la transparence, de la comparabilité et de la portabilité des certifications, entamée avec la recommandation CEC de 2008 (objectif spécifique 1). De nouvelles améliorations de la transparence, de la comparabilité et de la portabilité des certifications ont été signalées dans tous les domaines, en conséquence du cadre continu de coopération européenne sur les qualifications, structuré par les nouvelles dispositions mises à jour de la recommandation CEC de 2017. Les évolutions cruciales qui sous-tendent ces impacts, tels que les critères de référencement, les comparaisons horizontales et les études, sont toutes antérieures à 2017 et ont été maintenues en tant que dispositions dans la recommandation CEC de 2017. Les parties prenantes interrogées (principalement des autorités publiques, des responsables de la qualité et/ou de la reconnaissance des qualifications et des détenteurs de qualifications) et interviewées (principalement des autorités travaillant avec les qualifications, ainsi que des prestataires d'éducation et de formation) se sont montrées largement optimistes quant à l'efficacité de la recommandation en matière de transparence et de comparabilité des certifications, tant à l'intérieur des pays que d'un pays à l'autre. Les études de cas soulignent également que les personnes interrogées ne sont souvent pas en mesure de distinguer efficacement les réalisations de la recommandation CEC de 2008, de la recommandation CEC de 2017, voire des réformes nationales qui ont contribué à la modernisation de l'éducation et de la formation dans leur pays respectif.

En outre, la recommandation relative au CEC de 2017 a contribué à faciliter l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie (objectif spécifique 2), en aidant à renforcer la mise en place du CEC entre 2017 et 2022, mais il existe un potentiel inutilisé pour réduire plus activement les obstacles à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie à l'avenir. Les résultats de la recommandation sur la facilitation de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie ne sont pas visibles en termes d'amélioration significative des taux de participation à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie (c'est-à-dire qu'ils n'ont pas augmenté de manière significative entre 2017 et 2021). Toutefois, un effet positif peut être observé grâce à sa contribution à l'encouragement des réformes nationales visant à améliorer les conditions d'apprentissage des adultes. Depuis 2017, les CNC sont devenus plus complets, si l'on considère le nombre de niveaux qu'ils couvrent (tous les CNC), le nombre de secteurs d'éducation et de formation (tous les CNC sauf six couvrent tous les secteurs d'éducation et de formation formelles), et l'ouverture accrue de certains CNC aux certifications proposées en dehors des systèmes d'éducation et de formation formelles. Il reste encore une marge de manœuvre considérable pour améliorer les liens avec les qualifications en dehors du système formel à l'avenir.

Au niveau national, le CEC et les CNC ont contribué à inspirer la modernisation des systèmes d'éducation et de formation, en encourageant les réflexions nationales critiques et l'élaboration de politiques relatives aux certifications et aux systèmes d'éducation et de formation (objectif plus large 1). Premièrement, les réformes identifiées dans cette étude comprenaient l'élaboration ou le renouvellement des CNC et des mesures connexes, telles que la généralisation de l'utilisation des acquis d'apprentissage, l'introduction de mécanismes de modularisation et de validation ou l'introduction de nouveaux types de certifications. Deuxièmement, plusieurs pays ont lancé depuis 2017 des activités de réforme qui étaient bien alignées sur la recommandation CEC de 2017 afin de promouvoir l'employabilité, la mobilité et l'intégration sociale des apprenants et des travailleurs. Ces mesures comprennent par exemple le développement de nouveaux mécanismes de financement pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie ou une coordination plus étroite entre les prestataires d'éducation et le marché du travail. Si la recommandation CEC de 2017 peut être liée à de telles réformes nationales, les moteurs de ces réformes tendent à être plus profondément ancrés dans les contextes nationaux et ne sont pas directement liés à la recommandation CEC (par exemple, l'évolution démographique, le chômage des jeunes, les déficits de compétences, l'accroissement des inégalités sociales, etc.). L'impact de la recommandation CEC de 2017 est davantage considéré comme un facteur permettant de réfléchir à des caractéristiques ou à des évolutions spécifiques, grâce à ses travaux comparatifs et aux enseignements tirés dans d'autres systèmes.

Les éléments recueillis ne permettent pas de conclure à un impact direct de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 sur l'employabilité, la mobilité et l'intégration sociale des apprenants et des travailleurs (objectif plus large 2). Ces évolutions sont influencées par de nombreux facteurs et n'ont qu'une relation indirecte avec la recommandation du CEC de 2017, sans relation de cause à effet visible. Cependant, son lien avec les améliorations nationales liées à l'employabilité (des jeunes) et à l'intégration sociale peut être mis en évidence par le fait que la recommandation fournit des informations sur d'éventuelles réformes qui pourraient en fin de compte conduire à ce type de changements mesurables dans les comportements individuels des apprenants et des travailleurs.

### Coûts de la mise en œuvre de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 (efficacité)

Les coûts de mise en œuvre de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC sont limités et, dans une large mesure, compensés par les avantages qu'elle procure. Des coûts peuvent être identifiés pour la mise en œuvre de dispositions spécifiques de la recommandation au niveau national (mise en place de registres des certifications,

établissement de liens entre les niveaux du CEC/CNC et toutes les certifications figurant dans ces registres, et réalisation d'activités de communication et de sensibilisation), ainsi que pour la participation de chaque pays à l'AG. Au niveau européen, ces coûts couvrent la fourniture d'expertise par la Commission, le Centre européen pour le développement de la formation professionnelle (Cedefop) et la Fondation européenne pour la formation (ETF), ainsi que la coordination des travaux de l'AG et l'organisation de ses réunions et activités. Les avantages sont exprimés qualitativement et comprennent les progrès dans la compréhension des systèmes de certification à travers l'Europe, la confiance accrue grâce à la collaboration des pays participant au CEC, l'échange de points de vue et d'expériences, ainsi que l'examen des (mises à jour des) référencements. Ces avantages sont diffus et ne peuvent être exprimés en termes monétaires et ils restent donc difficiles à comparer spécifiquement aux coûts, mais semblent précieux par rapport aux coûts relativement limités, comme l'ont également confirmé les parties prenantes lors des diverses activités de consultation. Les parties prenantes peuvent percevoir des coûts nationaux supplémentaires, mais ceux-ci ne sont liés à la recommandation du CEC de 2017 que de manière indirecte et dépendent principalement des spécificités nationales de l'élaboration de leur CNC.

En termes de gouvernance, la **composition actuelle des parties prenantes représentées au sein de l'AG CEC est adéquate et le travail de l'AG CEC peut être considéré comme efficace car les méthodes de travail de l'AG CEC sont généralement efficaces et bien perçues par ses membres**, même si quelques améliorations supplémentaires pourraient être prévues pour stimuler une plus grande interaction lors des réunions et davantage d'échanges entre les Points de Contact Nationaux (PCN). En outre, le Cedefop et l'ETF soutiennent et contribuent à la mise en œuvre du CEC et l'efficacité de leur travail dans ce domaine est bien perçue par les parties prenantes, principalement constituées d'autorités publiques (y compris les membres du groupe de travail CEC et les Points de Contact Nationaux) et d'experts internationaux en qualifications. Enfin, des PCN ont été mis en place pour soutenir la poursuite du développement des CNC. La diffusion de l'information aux parties prenantes dans le domaine de l'éducation et de la formation est suffisante, mais la diffusion au grand public pourrait être renforcée.

## **La cohérence interne et externe de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 (cohérence)**

**Les dispositions de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC ont été jugées cohérentes sur le plan interne avec ses objectifs.** La recommandation présente une ambition claire et cohérente d'accroître la transparence, la comparabilité et la portabilité des certifications en Europe et de faciliter l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, et les actions stratégiques définies recommandées aux EM s'alignent de manière cohérente sur ces ambitions. L'étude ne relève aucune contradiction interne lorsqu'elle évalue chacune des actions spécifiques suggérées dans la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC par rapport aux objectifs pertinents, ni lorsqu'elle examine les actions dans leur ensemble par rapport au cadre général des objectifs. Le large champ d'application des objectifs de la recommandation du CEC de 2017 est un facteur explicatif de cette cohérence, car ils offrent de multiples voies pour la mise en œuvre des objectifs, qui contribuent tous à la transparence, à la comparabilité et à la portabilité des certifications, ainsi qu'à l'instauration d'un climat de confiance et de compréhension à l'égard des systèmes de certification d'autres pays.

Avec la poursuite de la mise en œuvre du CEC en tant que cadre de huit niveaux pour les certifications, la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC joue **un rôle de soutien important pour d'autres initiatives politiques, aux niveaux international, européen et national**. En outre, d'autres initiatives politiques renforcent également la position du CEC en tant que cadre de référence central dans le contexte européen plus large. En particulier, la fonction du CEC en tant que « dispositif de traduction », qui permet de comparer des certifications issues de systèmes et de contextes différents, constitue un élément important qui permet



à d'autres initiatives au niveau de l'UE d'atteindre leurs objectifs de manière cohérente. Les parties prenantes (principalement les autorités publiques, les responsables de la qualité et/ou de la reconnaissance des qualifications, ainsi que les détenteurs de qualifications) de l'enquête et de la consultation publique (CP) estiment également que la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC est parfaitement cohérente avec les instruments et les initiatives politiques de l'UE et des États membres. Un examen plus approfondi de ces instruments dans le cadre de l'étude a mis en évidence d'importantes complémentarités et n'a pas révélé de sources majeures d'incohérence. Le CEC vise à accroître la transparence et la comparabilité de l'offre de compétences (certifications), ce qui complète d'autres initiatives axées sur la demande, telles que les développements du Classement européen multilingue de capacités, concurrences, qualifications et occupations (ESCO) visant à fournir un langage commun sur les professions et les compétences sur le marché du travail.

## La valeur ajoutée européenne de la recommandation du CEC de 2017

Les objectifs de comparabilité et de transparence accrues des certifications en Europe, tels que soutenus par le CEC et la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC, **n'auraient pas pu être atteints sans l'action au niveau européen** dont le CEC de 2017 est un instrument essentiel. Le CEC fournit un point de référence commun pour l'élaboration des CNC, il établit une langue et une structure communes pour décrire et comparer les certifications, ce qui facilite à la fois une meilleure comparabilité et une plus grande transparence des certifications entre les pays. Ces objectifs sont impossibles à atteindre par chaque EM agissant seul au niveau national, car les certifications et les systèmes d'éducation et de formation varient considérablement d'un pays à l'autre. Il est donc difficile de comparer et de reconnaître les certifications entre les pays en l'absence de coopération au niveau européen. Les contributions au CEC ne peuvent toutefois pas être attribuées uniquement à la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC, mais reflètent également les efforts réalisés dans le cadre de la recommandation de 2008 sur le CEC.

## La pertinence de la recommandation du CEC de 2017

Le contexte dans lequel la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC a été adoptée a considérablement changé depuis 2017 en raison de diverses évolutions sociales et économiques et d'initiatives politiques de l'UE qui ont modifié le paysage des certifications dans l'UE et au-delà au cours des années allant jusqu'en 2022. Le **vieillessement des sociétés** a augmenté la part de la population âgée restant sur le marché du travail dans de nombreux pays et a exercé une pression sur les systèmes éducatifs pour qu'ils améliorent et renouvellent les compétences des travailleurs<sup>14</sup>. La double **transition verte et numérique** apporte également de nouveaux défis qui se traduisent par des changements dans les compétences requises par le marché du travail<sup>15</sup>. En outre, de nombreux pays concernés par le CEC sont touchés par l'**afflux continu de migrants**, gonflé récemment par un afflux sans précédent de personnes fuyant l'Ukraine, ce qui affecte la capacité d'adaptation des systèmes d'éducation et de formation et met au premier plan la reconnaissance des qualifications étrangères sur le marché du travail européen<sup>16</sup>. De surcroît, des initiatives politiques plus larges de l'UE adoptées depuis 2017 et axées, par exemple, sur la promotion de la reconnaissance automatique des certifications<sup>17</sup>, l'accroissement de la mobilité des apprenants de l'Enseignement et la Formation

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<sup>14</sup> Voir par exemple: European Commission (2020), European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change

<sup>15</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council (COM(2022)289) "2022 Strategic Foresight Report. Twinning the green and digital transitions in the new geopolitical context": <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0289&qid=1658824364827>

<sup>16</sup> Voir par exemple de l'ETF conversation on this topic: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/achieving-fair-recognition-migrants-qualifications> and Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 of 5 April 2022 on the recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554&from=EN>

<sup>17</sup> Recommendation du Conseil du 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16

Professionnels (EFP)<sup>18</sup>, l'élaboration d'un cadre européen pour la publication normalisée, intégrée et transparente de données sur les compétences et les certifications<sup>19</sup> ou l'offre de possibilités d'apprentissage plus flexibles grâce à l'introduction de microcertifications<sup>20</sup> et de comptes de formation individuels<sup>21</sup> modifient le contexte politique dans lequel la recommandation CEC de 2017 est mise en œuvre. Les macro-tendances susmentionnées et les développements politiques plus larges de l'UE modifient les besoins des parties prenantes du CEC. **La transition numérique et la migration sont considérées comme les principales macro-tendances** qui modifient leurs besoins et qui pourraient nécessiter des modifications de la recommandation de 2017 sur le CEC, selon les personnes interrogées durant l'enquête et l'a CP et les parties prenantes consultées lors des études de cas nationales. Parmi les changements politiques, l'émergence des micro-crédits est considérée comme le principal développement affectant les besoins des parties prenantes du CEC. **En tenant compte des changements significatifs du contexte dans lequel la recommandation du CEC de 2017 a été adoptée et les changements ultérieurs des besoins des parties prenantes du CEC, la pertinence de ses objectifs n'en est que renforcée.** C'est ce que confirment l'enquête, les personnes interrogées par la CP (principalement des autorités publiques, des responsables de la qualité et/ou de la reconnaissance des qualifications, ainsi que des détenteurs de qualifications) et les parties prenantes des études de cas nationales.

**La pertinence de la mise en œuvre de certaines dispositions spécifiques de la recommandation de 2017 est restée inchangée (voire augmentée), mais la manière de les mettre en œuvre doit être ajustée pour répondre aux besoins des parties prenantes. Les éléments recueillis suggèrent également qu'aucune modification n'est nécessaire concernant le texte juridique, la structure générale et le cadre du CEC.** Selon l'enquête, les répondants de la CP (principalement des autorités publiques, des responsables de la qualité et/ou de la reconnaissance des qualifications, ainsi que des détenteurs de qualifications) ainsi que différents groupes de parties prenantes consultés pour les études de cas nationales, il est nécessaire de procéder à des ajustements ou à un renforcement (par exemple au moyen d'orientations supplémentaires) dans la mise en œuvre de la communication et de la sensibilisation du grand public sur le CEC, afin qu'il reste pertinent. Ces améliorations s'appliquent à des domaines tels que l'information collectée pour les documents de certification, les suppléments et les bases de données/registres, les procédures communes de nivellement des certifications internationales, la facilitation de la comparaison avec les certifications de pays tiers ne relevant pas du CEC, la structure du cadre de référence du CEC et les principes communs d'assurance qualité.

## Enseignements tirés

**Il est nécessaire de poursuivre les travaux de la mise en œuvre du CEC et des CNC** afin de construire un cadre qui offre une valeur ajoutée pratique aux apprenants, aux travailleurs et aux employeurs. Des actions continues au niveau européen et des actions conjointes des EM peuvent faciliter la mise en place de ce cadre, qui devrait être lié à d'autres initiatives européennes et nationales. Les enseignements tirés ci-après peuvent soutenir les travaux sur le CEC dans cette direction à l'avenir :

1. Garantir et maintenir la confiance dans le référencement des CNC avec le CEC et dans les décisions nationales de nivellement [*enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité*]

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<sup>18</sup> Recommandation du Conseil du 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16

<sup>19</sup> Décision (UE) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

<sup>20</sup> Recommandation du Conseil du 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 10–25..

<sup>21</sup> Recommandation du Conseil du 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 26–34.

2. Continuer à encourager les EM à élaborer des CNC complets, couvrant tous les niveaux, ainsi qu'un plus grand nombre de systèmes d'éducation et de formation, et veiller à leur ouverture aux qualifications proposées en dehors des systèmes d'éducation et de formation formels. *[enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité et de pertinence].*
3. Lancer une discussion complète et bien informée, conduisant à une approche commune, sur la manière dont les CNC (et le CEC) peuvent intégrer des unités de certification plus petites (telles que les microcertifications) et sur les implications de la fourniture d'indications de niveau pour les micro-certifications. *[enseignement tiré en matière de pertinence]*
4. Poursuivre les travaux sur les descriptions communes des certifications afin de parvenir à des descriptions plus cohérentes des acquis d'apprentissage dans l'ensemble des systèmes éducatifs et des pays, afin de favoriser une meilleure adoption et utilisation du CEC par les apprenants, les travailleurs et les employeurs. *[enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité]*
5. Poursuivre l'intégration du CEC avec d'autres développements et initiatives plus proches de l'utilisateur tout en améliorant la communication sur l'explication des niveaux du CEC en vue d'une utilisation pratique. *[enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité et de cohérence].*

D'es enseignements complémentaires pourraient être envisagés pour soutenir ce travail et améliorer encore les aspects organisationnels et de gouvernance du CEC :

6. Améliorer encore les méthodes de travail de l'AG du CEC, en permettant une plus grande interaction et en stimulant les échanges entre les PCN. *[enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité]*
7. Poursuivre les travaux dans le cadre de la recommandation du CEC 2017 et stimuler la mise en œuvre par le biais de notes spécifiques et en reliant davantage le CEC à d'autres initiatives européennes. *[Enseignement tiré en matière d'efficacité et de cohérence].*

## Kurzfassung

Diese externe und unabhängige Studie zur Unterstützung der Europäischen Kommission bei der Bewertung der [Empfehlung des Rates vom 22. Mai 2017 über die Europäischen Qualifikationsrahmen für lebenslanges Lernen](#) (EQR-Empfehlung 2017) umfasst eine Bewertung der Wirksamkeit, der Effizienz, der Relevanz, der Kohärenz und des EU-Mehrwerts, die Bewertung der Maßnahmen und Fortschritte, die von den wichtigsten in der Empfehlung genannten Akteuren erzielt wurden, und das Einholen von Rückmeldungen eines breiten Spektrums an Interessenträgern. Die Studie deckt den Zeitraum vom 1. Juni 2017 bis zum 1. Juni 2022 ab und konzentriert sich auf die Bestimmungen der überarbeiteten EQR-Empfehlung 2017.

Die Studie umfasst alle 38 am EQR-Prozess beteiligten Länder,<sup>22</sup> darunter 27 EU-Mitgliedstaaten (MS), die vier EFTA-Länder (Island, Liechtenstein, Norwegen und Schweiz), fünf Bewerberländer (Albanien, Nordmazedonien, Montenegro, Serbien und Türkei) und potenzielle Kandidatenländer (Bosnien und Herzegowina und Kosovo<sup>23</sup>). In der Studie wird das Vereinigte Königreich für den Zeitraum bis zum Inkrafttreten des Austrittsabkommens (1. Februar 2020) berücksichtigt. Darüber hinaus wird in der Studie untersucht, wie der EQR zu einer besseren Durchlässigkeit von Qualifikationen zwischen EQR-Ländern und Drittländern (Ländern, die nicht am EQR teilnehmen) beigetragen hat.

Die in der Studie verwendeten Methoden umfassen die folgenden:

- **Explorative Interviews** zur Feinabstimmung der Evaluierungsfragen, zur Ermittlung der wichtigsten Interessenträger, als Grundlage für den Fragebogen der gezielten Online-Umfrage und zur öffentlichen Konsultation sowie zur Ermittlung von Schlüsselthemen für die Länderfallstudien.
- **Desk Research und Mapping** zur Gewinnung eines Überblicks zum Stand der Umsetzung der EQR-Empfehlung 2017, die den Sachstand 2017 und die Fortschritte bei der Umsetzung in den 38 teilnehmenden Ländern und auf EU-Ebene abbildet, und zur Überprüfung vorhandener Kenntnisse.
- **Gezielte Online-Umfrage** (im Folgenden: Umfrage) zur Sammlung von Erfahrungen, Meinungen und Vorschlägen in Bezug auf die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 seitens der Interessenträger, die an der Umsetzung des EQR beteiligt sind, oder derjenigen, die davon profitieren.
- Mittels **Interviews** wurden Überlegungen auf europäischer Ebene über die Empfehlung untersucht, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf der EU/Internationalen Ebene lag und die Entwicklungen des EQR eingehender untersucht wurden, einschließlich Governance, Kohärenz und Mehrwert.
- **Länderfallstudien** lieferten eine detailliertere Analyse von zehn ausgewählten Empfehlungen aus der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 in 15 ausgewählten EQR-Teilnehmerländern, um nationale Kontexte zu berücksichtigen, die die Umsetzung und Wirksamkeit der Empfehlung beeinflussen könnten.
- **Öffentliche Konsultation** (im Folgenden: PC) zur Einholung von Stellungnahmen eines breiteren Spektrums an Interessenträgern, insbesondere an Personen mit

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<sup>22</sup> Drei Länder wurden nach Juni 2022 eingeladen, sich dem EQR-Prozess anzuschließen (Ukraine, Moldawien und Georgien). Daher werden sie in dieser Studie als Nicht-EQR-Länder betrachtet.

<sup>23</sup> Die Bezeichnung XK/Kosovo lässt den Standpunkt zum Status unberührt und steht im Einklang mit dem VN-Sicherheitsrat 1244 und dem Gutachten des Internationalen Gerichtshofs zur Unabhängigkeitserklärung des Kosovo.

weniger direkter Beteiligung am EQR-Umsetzungsprozess oder aktiven Nutzern des EQR.

- Durch den **Validierungsworkshop** wurden die wichtigsten Interessenträger des EQR in Erörterung und Validierung der Schlussfolgerungen und Lehren aus der Studie sowie mit dem Sammeln von Ideen über die Verbindung zwischen EQR und Qualifikationen eingebunden.

## Umsetzung der EQR-Empfehlung 2017

Die spezifischen Bestimmungen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 werden **von Interessenträgern auf europäischer Ebene und auf nationaler Ebene weitestgehend wirksam umgesetzt**. Bei der Überprüfung von Umsetzung und Wirksamkeit ist die Kontinuität mit der EQR-Empfehlung von 2008 ein wichtiger Faktor. Die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 zielt darauf ab, den in der EQR-Empfehlung von 2008 festgelegten Ansatz zu stärken und gleichzeitig die Praktiken und Trends, die sich aus der Zusammenarbeit zwischen den EQR-Ländern und Interessenträgern ergeben, zu straffen und zu formalisieren. Insgesamt 17 von 18 spezifischen Bestimmungen können in gewissem Maße mit der Arbeit vor 2017 verknüpft werden, entweder als unmittelbare Fortsetzung früherer Fortschritte (z. B. Unterstützung der konsequenten Nutzung von Lernergebnissen, Bereitstellung von Informationen über das Qualifikationslevel), Formalisierung bestehender Praktiken (z. B. Referenzierung, Aktualisierung von Referenzierungsberichten, Entwicklung von Leistungspunktsystemen) oder Feinabstimmung bestehender Bestimmungen (z. B. Öffnung für Qualifikationen außerhalb des formalen Bildungssystems, Verknüpfung von Qualifikationsdatenbanken mit dem Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR)). Die übrigen neuen Bestimmungen konzentrieren sich auf die Entwicklung von Kriterien/Verfahren, die einen Vergleich mit Qualifikationsrahmen aus Drittländern ermöglichen würden. Auch hier baut die Arbeit bereits auf Aktivitäten und Pilotprojekten auf, die von der AG vor 2017 initiiert wurden. Im Folgenden stellt die Studie ausführlicher dar, was durch jede dieser Bestimmungen erreicht wurde.

- **Stärkung der Umsetzung des EQR:** In der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 wurde der seit 2008 bestehende Ansatz zur Referenzierung<sup>24</sup> fortgeführt und gilt nach wie vor als wichtiges, wenn auch zeitintensives Instrument für kritische Überlegungen und für die Zusammenarbeit mit Interessenträgern innerhalb der EQR AG. Die Einführung einer formellen Bestimmung zur Aktualisierung der Referenzierung ist wirksam gewesen, da die Anzahl der tatsächlich ausgeführten Aktualisierungen seit 2017 mit den Erwartungen übereinstimmt. Ohne feste Kriterien, die die Notwendigkeit solcher Aktualisierungen regulieren, müssen die Mitgliedstaaten allerdings selbst die Initiative für eine erneute Referenzierung ergreifen. Dies bedeutet, dass es in den kommenden Jahren wichtig sein wird, zu überwachen, inwiefern die Anzahl der Aktualisierungen den Fortentwicklungen der nationalen Qualifikationssystemen folgt.
- **Förderung der Verknüpfungen zwischen formalem, nichtformalem und informellem Lernen:** Ein Blick auf die Entwicklungen zwischen 2017-2022 zeigt, dass die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 in Sachen Förderung besserer Verknüpfungen mit Qualifikationen außerhalb des formalen Systems der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung in gewissem Maße wirksam war. Selbst wenn die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 den EQR-Ländern nicht ausdrücklich empfiehlt, den Umfang ihrer nationalen Rahmen und Systeme zu erweitern, bietet der EQR einen übergreifenden Rahmen und unterstützt umfassendere Entwicklungen in dieser

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<sup>24</sup> Die Nutzung des Begriffes ‚Referenzierung‘ im Sinne von ‚referencing‘ (vgl. englischer Originaltext der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017) geht auf den Wortgebrauch im deutschen EQR-Referenzierungsberichtes zurück. Dies hat den Grund, dass die deutsche Übersetzung der EQR-Empfehlung sowohl ‚referencing‘ als auch ‚levelling‘ mit ‚Zuordnung‘ bzw. ‚zuordnen‘ übersetzt. Um Verwirrung bzw. Ungenauigkeiten zu vermeiden, orientiert sich diese Kurzfassung in diesem Zusammenhang an der Terminologie des deutschen Referenzierungsberichtes.

Richtung. Entwicklungen hin zur Inkludierung nichtformaler Qualifikationen sind häufiger in Ländern mit ausgereifteren Qualifikationssystemen zu beobachten. Rund die Hälfte der EQR-Länder verfügt über NQR, die nicht für nichtformale Qualifikationen offen sind. Innerhalb dieser Gruppe sind jedoch Arbeiten hin zur Einbeziehung solcher Qualifikationen zu einem gewissen Grad im Gange oder nichtformale und informelle Qualifikationen sind durch Validierungsverfahren mit den NQR verknüpft.

- **Verknüpfung gemeinsamer Grundsätze mit NQR:** Die in der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 eingeführten gemeinsamen Grundsätze für Qualitäts- und Leistungspunktsysteme haben im Vergleich zur EQR-Empfehlung von 2008 begrenzte neue Entwicklungen ausgelöst. Die bestehenden Referenzierungsarbeiten und die entwickelten Strukturen von NQR werden bereits als Beitrag zum Vertrauen in die Qualität einer Qualifikation angesehen, obwohl die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 keine direkten Auswirkungen auf die Grundsätze der Qualitätssicherung in der Praxis hatte. Auch in Bezug auf die Leistungspunktsysteme, die mit NQR verknüpft sind, wurden in der Studie geringfügige Änderungen bei der Organisation und Verknüpfung dieser Systeme mit dem jeweiligen NQR infolge der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 festgestellt. Die Mehrheit der Länder, in denen Leistungspunktsysteme mit dem NQR verknüpft sind, hatte diese bereits vor 2017 eingeführt.
- **Verfügbarkeit und Zugänglichkeit von Informationen über Qualifikationen:** Alle EU-Mitgliedstaaten mit referenzierten NQR stellen nun EQR-Niveaus auf bestimmten Arten von Qualifikationsdokumenten dar. Dies belegt die diesbezügliche Wirksamkeit der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017, da es sich um eine erhebliche Verbesserung gegenüber der Situation vor 2017 handelt. Breitere Auswirkungen lassen sich in Bezug auf die Zugänglichkeit von Informationen über Qualifikationen und ihre Lernergebnisse beobachten, die mit der Umsetzung der Bestimmungen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 in Verbindung gebracht werden können. Auch über Kerninformationen über den Inhalt/das Qualifikationsniveau hinaus trugen die breiteren EQR/NQR-Kommunikationsaktivitäten auf EU-Ebene und von den EQR-Ländern selbst dazu bei, das Bewusstsein für den EQR seit 2017 zu schärfen. Es bestehen allerdings nach wie vor Herausforderungen, wenn es darum geht, Endbegünstigte zu erreichen und einzuschätzen, welche Kommunikationsaktivitäten inwieweit am effektivsten sind.

## **Ergebnisse und Auswirkungen der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 (Wirksamkeit)**

**Die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 setzte den mit der EQR-Empfehlung von 2008 eingeleiteten Weg zur Verbesserung der Transparenz, Vergleichbarkeit und Übertragbarkeit von Qualifikationen fort (spezifisches Ziel 1).**

Weitere Verbesserungen bei der Transparenz, Vergleichbarkeit und Übertragbarkeit von Qualifikationen traten flächendeckend auf. Diese sind auf die neuen bzw. aktualisierten Regelungen der EQF-Empfehlung von 2017, welchen den fortlaufenden Rahmen für europäische Kooperation zum Thema Qualifikationen strukturieren, zurückzuführen. Entscheidende Entwicklungen, die eben diese Auswirkung zur Folge haben, wie z.B. die Referenzierungskriterien, horizontale Vergleiche und Studien, haben bereits vor 2017 begonnen und wurden als Bestimmungen in der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 beibehalten. Die sowohl durch Umfragen (v.a. öffentliche Behörden, Verantwortliche, die für die Qualität bzw. Anerkennung von Qualifikationen zuständig sind sowie Inhaber von Qualifikationen) als auch Interviews (v.a. öffentliche Behörden, die mit Qualifikationen sowie Bildungs- und Trainingseinrichtungen arbeiten) befragten Interessenträger waren in Sachen Wirksamkeit der Empfehlung in Bezug auf Transparenz und Vergleichbarkeit von Qualifikationen sowohl innerhalb als auch länderübergreifend allerdings weitgehend optimistisch. Die

Länderfallstudien weisen auch darauf hin, dass die Befragten oft nicht in der Lage sind, wirksam zwischen den Ergebnissen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2008, der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 oder nationalen Reformen, die zur Modernisierung der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung in ihren Ländern beigetragen haben, zu unterscheiden.

Darüber hinaus trug die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 **zur Erleichterung des lebenslangen Lernens (spezifisches Ziel 2) bei, indem sie dazu beigetragen hat, die Etablierung des EQR zwischen 2017 und 2022 weiter zu stärken. Allerdings besteht weiterhin ungenutztes Potenzial, die Hindernisse für lebenslanges Lernen in Zukunft aktiver abzubauen.** Die Auswirkungen der Empfehlung in Sachen Förderung des lebenslangen Lernens bilden sich nicht durch einen signifikanten Anstieg der Teilnehmerzahlen in Angeboten des lebenslangen Lernens zwischen 2017 und 2022 ab. Eine positive Wirkung zeigt sich jedoch an ihrem Beitrag zur Förderung nationaler Reformen, die darauf abzielen, die Bedingungen für das Lernen von Erwachsenen zu verbessern. Seit 2017 sind die NQR umfassender geworden, gemessen an der Anzahl der Levels, die sie abdecken (alle NQR), der Zahl der Sektoren der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung (alle NQR, wobei sechs alle formalen Bereiche der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung abdecken) und der erhöhten Offenheit einiger NQR für Qualifikationen, die außerhalb der formalen Systeme der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung angeboten werden. Dennoch bleibt ein beträchtlicher Spielraum, um Verknüpfungen zu Qualifikationen über das formale System hinaus in Zukunft weiter zu verbessern und zu stärken.

Auf nationaler Ebene tragen der **EQR und die NQR dazu bei, die Modernisierung der Systeme der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung anzuregen, indem sie kritische nationale Überlegungen und politische Entwicklungen in Bezug auf Qualifikationen, allgemeine und berufliche Bildungssysteme (weitergefasstes Ziel 1)** fördern. Erstens umfassten die in der Studie ermittelten Reformen die Entwicklung oder Erneuerung von NQR und damit zusammenhängenden Maßnahmen wie die Verallgemeinerung der Nutzung von Lernergebnissen, die Einführung von Modularisierungs- und Validierungsmechanismen oder die Einführung neuer Qualifikationstypen. Zweitens haben die Länder seit 2017 mehrere Reformmaßnahmen eingeleitet, die gut auf die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 abgestimmt waren, um Beschäftigungsfähigkeit, Mobilität und soziale Integration von Lernenden und Arbeitnehmern zu fördern, beispielsweise durch die Entwicklung neuer Finanzierungsmechanismen für lebenslanges Lernen oder eine engere Koordinierung zwischen Bildungsanbietern und dem Arbeitsmarkt. Die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 kann zwar mit solchen nationalen Reformen in Verbindung gebracht werden, doch sind die Triebkräfte dieser Reformen tendenziell stärker im nationalen Kontext verankert und stehen nicht unmittelbar mit der EQR-Empfehlung in Verbindung (z. B. demografischer Wandel, Jugendarbeitslosigkeit, Qualifikationslücken, zunehmende soziale Ungleichheiten usw.). Die Auswirkungen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 sind eher als Faktor anzusehen, der es durch seinen vergleichenden Charakter ermöglicht, über spezifische Merkmale oder Entwicklungen zu reflektieren und Erkenntnisse aus anderen Systemen zu gewinnen.

**Die gesammelten Nachweise ergeben keinen feststellbaren Zusammenhang zwischen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 und gesteigerter Arbeitsmarktfähigkeit, Mobilität und sozialer Integration von Lernenden und Arbeitnehmern** (weitergefasstes Ziel 2). Diese Aspekte werden von vielen Faktoren beeinflusst und stehen nur indirekt in Bezug zur EQR-Empfehlung von 2017, da kein sichtbarer ursächlicher Zusammenhang besteht. Die Empfehlung kann jedoch mit nationalen Verbesserungen im Zusammenhang mit der (Jugend-)Beschäftigungsfähigkeit und der sozialen Integration in dahingehend in Verbindung stehen, dass sie als Grundlage für solche Reformen dienen könnte, die letztlich zu messbaren Veränderungen des individuellen Verhaltens von Lernenden und Arbeitnehmern führen könnten.

## **Kosten der Umsetzung der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 (Effizienz)**

Die **Kosten für die Umsetzung der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 sind begrenzt und werden von den Vorteilen weitestgehend überwogen.** Die Kosten für die Umsetzung spezifischer Bestimmungen der Empfehlung auf nationaler Ebene (Einrichtung von Qualifikationsregistern, Verknüpfung der Niveaus des EQR/NQR mit allen Qualifikationen in diesen Registern, Durchführung von Kommunikations- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit) sowie die Beteiligung jedes Landes an der AG können ermittelt werden. Auf europäischer Ebene beinhalten diese Kosten die Bereitstellung von Fachwissen durch die Kommission, das Europäische Zentrum für die Förderung der Berufsbildung (Cedefop) und die Europäische Stiftung für Berufsbildung (ETF) sowie die Koordinierung der Arbeit der AG und die Durchführung ihrer Sitzungen und Tätigkeiten. Die Vorteile drücken sich qualitativ aus und umfassen die Fortschritte hin zu einem besseren Verständnis der Qualifikationssysteme in ganz Europa, die Stärkung des Vertrauens durch Zusammenarbeit, den Austausch von Ansichten und Erfahrungen sowie die Überprüfung bzw. Verbesserung von Referenzierungen. Diese Vorteile sind diffus, können nicht monetär ausgedrückt werden und sind daher nach wie vor nur schwer mit den Kosten zu vergleichen, erscheinen aber aufgrund der relativ begrenzten Kosten ausreichend, was auch von den Interessenträgern während der verschiedenen Konsultationsaktivitäten bestätigt wurde. Zusätzliche nationale Kosten sind laut Interessenträgern wahrnehmbar, beziehen sich jedoch nur indirekt auf die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 und hängen überwiegend von den nationalen Besonderheiten der Entwicklung ihres NQR ab.

In Bezug auf Governance **ist die derzeitige Zusammensetzung der in der EQF AG vertretenen Interessensträger angemessen. Die Arbeit der EQF AG kann als effizient angesehen werden, da ihre Arbeitsmethoden im Allgemeinen wirksam und von ihren Mitgliedern gut wahrgenommen werden.** Trotzdem könnten einige weitere Verbesserungen vorgenommen werden, um die Interaktion während der Sitzungen und einen stärkeren Austausch zwischen den nationalen Koordinierungsstellen (NCPs) anzuregen. Darüber hinaus tragen Cedefop und der ETF zur Umsetzung des EQR bei. Die Effizienz ihrer Arbeit in diesem Bereich wird von relevanten Interessenträgern (v.a. öffentlichen Behörden, wie Mitgliedern der EQR AG sowie NCPs, und internationalen Qualifikationsexperten) als gut wahrgenommen. Schließlich sind auch NCPs eingerichtet und unterstützen die Weiterentwicklung der NQR. Die Verbreitung von Informationen für die Interessenträger im Bereich der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung ist ausreichend. Die Verbreitung an die breite Öffentlichkeit könnte jedoch verstärkt werden.

## **Interne und externe Kohärenz der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 (Kohärenz)**

**Es wurde festgestellt, dass die Bestimmungen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 intern im Einklang mit ihren Zielen stehen.** Die Empfehlung bietet ein klares und kohärentes Ziel, die Transparenz, Vergleichbarkeit und Übertragbarkeit von Qualifikationen in ganz Europa zu erhöhen und das lebenslange Lernen zu erleichtern, und die den Mitgliedsstaaten empfohlenen politischen Maßnahmen sind kohärent auf diese Ziele angepasst. Die vorliegende Studie stellt keine internen Widersprüche bei der Bewertung der in der EQR-Empfehlung 2017 vorgeschlagenen spezifischen Maßnahmen im Hinblick auf die jeweiligen Ziele oder bei der Überprüfung der Maßnahmen in ihrer Gesamtheit gegenüber dem allgemeinen Zielrahmen fest. Der breite Anwendungsbereich der Ziele der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 sind Erklärungsfaktoren für diese Kohärenz, da diese mehrere Wege zur Umsetzung ihrer Ziele bieten, die alle zur Transparenz, Vergleichbarkeit und Übertragbarkeit von Qualifikationen sowie zum Aufbau von Vertrauen und Verständnis in Qualifikationssysteme aus anderen Ländern beitragen.

Mit der weiteren Umsetzung des EQR als achtstufiger Qualifikationsrahmen **spielt die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 eine wichtige unterstützende Rolle für andere politische Initiativen auf internationaler, europäischer und nationaler Ebene.** Darüber hinaus stärken andere politische Initiativen die Position des EQR als zentraler Bezugsrahmen im



breiteren europäischen Kontext. Insbesondere die Funktion des EQR als „Übersetzungsgerät“, das den Vergleich von Qualifikationen aus verschiedenen Systemen und Hintergründen ermöglicht, ist ein wichtiger Baustein, der es anderen Initiativen auf EU-Ebene ermöglicht, ihre kohärenten Ziele zu erreichen. Die Interessenträger, die an der Umfrage und der öffentlichen Konsultation (PC) teilgenommen haben (v.a. öffentliche Behörden, Verantwortliche, die für die Qualität bzw. Anerkennung von Qualifikationen zuständig sind sowie Inhaber von Qualifikationen), halten die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 ebenfalls für kohärent mit den Instrumenten und politischen Initiativen der EU und der Mitgliedstaaten. Eine eingehendere Überprüfung solcher Instrumente in dieser Studie hat keine wesentlichen Quellen von Inkohärenz gefunden. Ganz im Gegenteil lassen sich wichtige Komplementaritäten feststellen.

Mit dem EQR soll die Transparenz und Vergleichbarkeit der Angebotsseite von Kompetenzen (Qualifikationen) erhöht werden, was andere Initiativen ergänzt, die sich auf die Nachfrageseite konzentrieren, wie die Entwicklung der europäischen Klassifizierung für Fähigkeiten/Kompetenzen, Qualifikationen und Berufe (ESCO) zur Bereitstellung einer gemeinsamen Sprache für Berufe und Kompetenzen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt.

## EU-Mehrwert der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017

Die Ziele einer besseren Vergleichbarkeit und Transparenz von Qualifikationen in Europa, auf die der EQR und die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 abzielen, **wären ohne die Maßnahme auf europäischer Ebene, bei der der EQR 2017 ein Schlüsselinstrument ist, nicht zu erreichen**. Der EQR bietet einen gemeinsamen Bezugspunkt für die (Weiter-)Entwicklung der NQR. Weiterhin hat er eine gemeinsame Sprache und Struktur für die Beschreibung und den Vergleich von Qualifikationen geschaffen, was sowohl die Vergleichbarkeit als auch die Transparenz der Qualifikationen zwischen den Ländern erleichtert. Diese Ziele sind von den Mitgliedstaaten auf rein nationaler Ebene nicht zu erreichen, da die Qualifikations- und Bildungssysteme von Land zu Land sehr unterschiedlich sind. Dies macht es schwierig, Qualifikationen zwischen den Ländern zu vergleichen und anzuerkennen, ohne auf europäischer Ebene zusammenzuarbeiten. Die Beiträge des EQR hierzu sind allerdings nicht ausschließlich auf die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 zurückzuführen, sondern spiegeln Bemühungen wider, die seit der EQF-Empfehlung von 2008 im Gange sind.

## Relevanz der EQR-Empfehlung 2017

Der Kontext, in dem die EQR-Empfehlung 2017 verabschiedet wurde, hat sich seit 2017 aufgrund verschiedener sozialer und wirtschaftlicher Entwicklungen und politischer Initiativen der EU, die die Qualifikationslandschaft in der gesamten EU und darüber hinaus in den Jahren bis 2022 betroffen haben, erheblich verändert. **Die alternden Gesellschaften** haben den Anteil der älteren Menschen, die in vielen Ländern auf dem Arbeitsmarkt verbleiben, erhöht und Druck auf die Bildungssysteme ausgeübt, um Arbeitnehmer weiterzubilden und umzuqualifizieren<sup>25</sup>. Die **grüne und digitale Transformation** bringt auch neue Herausforderungen mit sich, die zu Veränderungen bei den Qualifikationen führen, die auf dem Arbeitsmarkt erforderlich sind<sup>26</sup>. Darüber hinaus sind viele EQR-Länder von einem kontinuierlichen **Zustrom an Migranten** betroffen, der in jüngster Zeit von einem beispiellosen Zustrom von Menschen aus der Ukraine erschwert wird, was wiederum die Anpassungsfähigkeit der Systeme der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung beeinträchtigt und die Anerkennung ausländischer Qualifikationen auf dem

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<sup>25</sup> Siehe zum Beispiel: Europäische Kommission (2020), Bericht der Europäischen Kommission über die Auswirkungen des demografischen Wandels

<sup>26</sup> Mitteilung der Kommission an das Europäische Parlament und den Rat (KOM(2022)289) „Strategischer Vorausschaubericht 2022“. Partnerschaften zwischen dem ökologischen und dem digitalen Wandel im neuen geopolitischen Kontext“ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0289&qid=1658824364827>

europäischen Arbeitsmarkt in den Vordergrund stellt<sup>27</sup>. Darüber hinaus verändern seit 2017 umfassendere politische Initiativen der EU, die sich beispielsweise auf die Förderung der automatischen Anerkennung von Qualifikationen<sup>28</sup>, die Erhöhung der Mobilität der Lernenden in der beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung<sup>29</sup>, die Entwicklung eines europäischen Rahmens für eine standardisierte, integrierte und transparente Veröffentlichung von Daten über Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen<sup>30</sup> oder die Bereitstellung flexiblerer Lernmöglichkeiten durch die Einführung von Mikro-Credentials<sup>31</sup> und individuellen Lernkonten konzentrieren<sup>32</sup>, den politischen Kontext, in dem die EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 umgesetzt wird. Die oben genannten Makrotrends und die weiteren politischen Entwicklungen in der EU verändern die Bedürfnisse der EQR-Interessenträger. Es wird angenommen, dass **der digitale Wandel und die Migration die wichtigsten Makrotrends sind**, die ihre Bedürfnisse verändern und möglicherweise Änderungen an EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 erforderlich machen. Dies geht aus Antworten aus der Umfrage, von PC-Befragten und Interessenträgern aus den Länderfallstudien hervor. Unter den politischen Veränderungen wird die Entstehung von Mikro-Credentials als die Schlüsselentwicklung angesehen, die die Bedürfnisse der EQR-Interessenträger beeinflusst. **Trotz der erheblichen Veränderungen im Zusammenhang mit der Annahme der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 und den anschließenden Änderungen des Bedarfs der EQR-Akteure erhöht sich die Relevanz der Ziele der Empfehlung nur.** Dies wird durch die Umfrage, PC-Befragte und Interessenträger aus der Länderfallstudie bestätigt.

**Die Relevanz der Umsetzung einiger spezifischer Bestimmungen der EQR-Empfehlung von 2017 bleibt unverändert bzw. steigt sogar. Allerdings sollte die Art und Weise ihrer Umsetzung besser an die Bedürfnisse der Interessensträger angepasst werden. Die gesammelten Informationen deuten weiterhin darauf hin, dass keine Änderungen am Rechtstext bzw. der generellen Struktur des EQR notwendig sind.** Den Umfrageergebnissen, den Teilnehmern der PC (v.a. öffentliche Behörden, Verantwortliche, die für die Qualität bzw. Anerkennung von Qualifikationen zuständig sind sowie Inhaber von Qualifikationen), und weiteren Interessenträgern, die im Rahmen der Länderfallstudien befragt worden sind, müssen die Umsetzung der Kommunikation und der Öffentlichkeitsarbeit des EQR, die gesammelten Informationen für Qualifikationsdokumente, Ergänzungen und Datenbanken/Register, gemeinsame Verfahren zur Angleichung internationaler Qualifikationen, Erleichterungen des Vergleichs mit Qualifikationsnachweisen aus Drittländern, Strukturen des EQR-Referenzrahmens und gemeinsame Grundsätze der Qualitätssicherung angepasst oder gestärkt werden (z. B. durch weitere Leitlinien), um weiterhin relevant zu bleiben.

## Gewonnene Erkenntnisse

**Bei der Umsetzung des EQR und der NQR ist weitere Arbeit erforderlich**, um einen Rahmen zu schaffen, der Lernenden, Arbeitnehmern und Arbeitgebern einen praktischen Mehrwert bietet. Kontinuierliche Maßnahmen auf europäischer Ebene und seitens der Mitgliedsstaaten können diesen Rahmen stärken, was wiederum mit anderen europäischen

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<sup>27</sup> Siehe z. B. ETF-Gespräche zu diesem Thema: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/achieving-fair-recognition-migrants-qualifications> und Empfehlung (EU) 2022/554 der Kommission vom 5. April 2022 über die Anerkennung von Qualifikationen für Personen, die vor Russlands Invasion in die Ukraine fliehen: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554&from=EN>

<sup>28</sup> Empfehlung des Rates vom 16. Juni 2022 zu individuellen Lernkonten (ABl. C 243 vom 27.6.2022, S. 26).

<sup>29</sup> Empfehlung des Rates vom 24. November 2020 zur beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung für nachhaltige Wettbewerbsfähigkeit, soziale Gerechtigkeit und Resilienz ( ABl. C 417 vom 2.12.2020, S. 1).

<sup>30</sup> Empfehlung des Rates vom 24. November 2020 zur beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung für nachhaltige Wettbewerbsfähigkeit, soziale Gerechtigkeit und Resilienz ( ABl. C 417 vom 2.12.2020, S. 1).

<sup>31</sup> Beschluss (EU) 2018/646 des Europäischen Parlaments und des Rates vom 18. April 2018 über einen gemeinsamen Rahmen für die Bereitstellung besserer Dienstleistungen für Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen (Europass) und zur Aufhebung des Beschlusses Nr. 2241/2004/EG ( ABl. L 112 vom 2.5.2018, S. 42).

<sup>32</sup> Empfehlung des Rates vom 16. Juni 2022 zu einem europäischen Ansatz für Mikrokredite für lebenslanges Lernen und Beschäftigungsfähigkeit (ABl. C 243 vom 27.6.2022, S. 10).

und nationalen Initiativen verknüpft werden sollte. Die folgenden gewonnenen Erkenntnisse können die Arbeit am EQR in Zukunft in diese Richtung unterstützen:

1. Vertrauen in die Referenzierung von NQR zum EQR sowie nationale Zuordnungsentscheidungen sollte gesichert und aufrechterhalten werden *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis im Zusammenhang mit Wirksamkeit]*:
2. Die Mitgliedstaaten sollten weiterhin dazu ermutigt werden, umfassende NQR zu entwickeln, die alle Levels und mehr Systeme der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung umfassen. Weiterhin sollte Offenheit für Qualifikationen außerhalb der formalen Systeme der allgemeinen und beruflichen Bildung gesichert sein. *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis im Zusammenhang mit Wirksamkeit und Relevanz]*
3. Eine umfassende und fundierte Diskussion, die zu einem gemeinsamen Ansatz führt, wie kleinere Qualifikationseinheiten (wie Mikro-Credentials) in NQR (und das EQR) integriert werden können und welche Auswirkungen die Bereitstellung von Level-Indikationen für Mikro-Credentials haben könnte, sollte eingeleitet werden. *[Lesson gelernt im Zusammenhang mit Relevanz]*
4. Arbeit an gemeinsamen Qualifikationsbeschreibungen, um einheitlichere Beschreibungen der Lernergebnisse in allen Bildungssystemen und Ländern zu erzielen, um wiederum eine bessere Aufnahme und Nutzung des EQR durch Lernende, Arbeitnehmer und Arbeitgeber zu unterstützen sollte fortgesetzt werden *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis in Zusammenhang mit Wirksamkeit]*
5. Der EQR sollte weiter in andere Entwicklungen und Initiativen integriert werden, die dem Nutzer näher sind, während gleichzeitig die Kommunikation zur Erläuterung der EQR-Niveaus für die praktische Anwendung verbessert wird. *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis im Zusammenhang mit Wirksamkeit und Kohärenz]*

Zusätzliche Erkenntnisse können in Betracht gezogen werden, um diese Arbeit zu unterstützen und die organisatorischen und Governance-Aspekte des EQR weiter zu verbessern:

6. Die Arbeitsmethoden der EQF AG sollten weiter verbessert werden und der Austausch zwischen den nationalen Kontaktstellen sollte weiter gefördert werden. *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis im Zusammenhang mit Effizienz]*
7. Arbeit im Rahmen der EQR-Empfehlung für 2017 sollte fortgesetzt werden und ihre Umsetzung durch spezifische Vermerke und eine weitere Verknüpfung des EQR mit anderen europäischen Initiativen sollte gefördert werden. *[Gewonnene Erkenntnis im Zusammenhang mit Effizienz und Kohärenz]*

## Abbreviations

<b>ACQF</b>	African Continental Qualifications Framework
<b>AG</b>	Advisory Group
<b>AL</b>	Albania
<b>AQF</b>	Australian Qualifications Framework
<b>AQRF</b>	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>AT</b>	Austria
<b>BA</b>	Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>BE</b>	Belgium
<b>BG</b>	Bulgaria
<b>CEDEFOP</b>	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
<b>CH</b>	Switzerland
<b>CPF</b>	personal training account ( <i>Compte Personnel de Formation</i> )
<b>CQP</b>	certificates of professional qualifications
<b>CV</b>	curriculum vitae
<b>CY</b>	Cyprus
<b>CZ</b>	Czechia
<b>DE</b>	Germany
<b>DG-EAC</b>	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
<b>DG-EMPL</b>	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
<b>DK</b>	Denmark
<b>DQR</b>	German National Qualifications Framework ( <i>Deutsche Qualifikationsrahmen</i> )
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ECTS</b>	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
<b>ECVET</b>	European Credit system for VET
<b>EE</b>	Estonia
<b>EEA</b>	European Education Area
<b>EHEA</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>EL</b>	Greece
<b>ELGPN</b>	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
<b>ENIC-NARIC</b>	European Network of Information Centres – National Academic Recognition Information Centres
<b>EQAVET</b>	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
<b>EQF</b>	European Qualifications Framework
<b>ES</b>	Spain
<b>ESA</b>	European Skills Agenda
<b>ESCO</b>	European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ESG</b>	European Standards and Guidelines
<b>ETB</b>	Education Training Board
<b>ETF</b>	Education and Training Foundation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EU-OSHA</b>	European Union information agency for occupational safety and health
<b>EUR</b>	euro (currency)
<b>FEG</b>	Skilled Immigration Act for qualified professionals ( <i>Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz</i> )
<b>FET</b>	further education and training

<b>FI</b>	Finland
<b>FR</b>	France
<b>FTE</b>	full-time equivalent
<b>HE</b>	higher education
<b>HKQF</b>	Hong Kong Qualifications Framework
<b>HR</b>	Croatia
<b>HU</b>	Hungary
<b>IBE</b>	Educational Research Institute (Poland)
<b>ICT</b>	information and communication technology
<b>IE</b>	Ireland
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IQQF</b>	Irish Qualifications and Quality Forum
<b>IQS</b>	Integrated Qualifications System
<b>IS</b>	Iceland
<b>ISG</b>	Inter-Service Group
<b>IT</b>	Italy
<b>LI</b>	Liechtenstein
<b>LLL</b>	lifelong learning
<b>LOQ</b>	learning opportunities and qualifications
<b>LT</b>	Lithuania
<b>LU</b>	Luxembourg
<b>LV</b>	Latvia
<b>ME</b>	Montenegro
<b>MECES</b>	Spanish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education
<b>MECU</b>	Spanish Qualifications Framework
<b>MK</b>	North Macedonia
<b>MS</b>	Member States
<b>MT</b>	Malta
<b>NA</b>	not applicable
<b>NCP</b>	national coordination point
<b>NE</b>	northeast
<b>NF</b>	non-formal
<b>NFQ</b>	National Framework of Qualifications
<b>NL</b>	Netherlands
<b>NLQF</b>	Dutch Qualifications Framework
<b>NO</b>	Norway
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>NQFS</b>	National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
<b>NRQ</b>	National Register of Qualifications
<b>NSK</b>	National Register of Vocational Qualifications
<b>NW</b>	northwest
<b>NZQF</b>	New Zealand Qualifications Framework
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PC</b>	public consultation
<b>PL</b>	Poland
<b>PLA</b>	peer-learning activity
<b>PT</b>	Portugal
<b>QA</b>	quality assurance
<b>QDG</b>	Qualifications Framework of the German-speaking Community

<b>QDR</b>	Qualifications Dataset Register
<b>QF</b>	qualifications framework
<b>QQI</b>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
<b>RNCP</b>	National Register of Vocational and Professional Qualifications
<b>RO</b>	Romania
<b>RQF</b>	regional qualifications framework
<b>RS</b>	Serbia
<b>RVCC</b>	recognition, validation and certification of professional competences
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SE</b>	Sweden
<b>SI</b>	Slovenia
<b>SK</b>	Slovakia
<b>SLIM</b>	subsidy for learning and development in SMEs
<b>SMART</b>	specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound
<b>SMEs</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprises
<b>SQF</b>	Slovenian Qualifications Framework
<b>STAP</b>	<i>Stimulans Arbeidsmarkt Positie</i> (incentive for improvement of labour market position)
<b>SW</b>	southwest
<b>TR</b>	Türkiye
<b>UIL</b>	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCHR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>VET</b>	vocational education and training
<b>XK</b>	Kosovo <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The designation XK / Kosovo is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of the present assignment is to carry out an external and independent study to support the European Commission in the evaluation of [Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning](#) (2017 EQF Recommendation). The aim of the study is to provide information about the actions taken, experience gained, and implications for the future.

In terms of **content**, the study focuses on:

- Assessing the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and EU added value of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.
- Assessing any actions and progress made by the main actors towards whom the Recommendation was directed, namely: (1) the EU Member States (MS); (2) the European Commission (EC); and (3) the EC, in cooperation with the MS and stakeholders within the EQF Advisory Group (AG).

With regard to the study's **geographical scope**:

- The study covers all 38 countries involved in the EQF process, including the 27 EU MS; the four EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland); five candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Türkiye); and two potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo<sup>34</sup>). While the 2017 EQF Recommendation is formally addressed to MS, its contents apply similarly to all non-EU countries that participate in the EQF process. The study therefore covers both groups to a similar extent, differentiating between them where this is possible and relevant.
- The three countries invited to join the EQF process after June 2022 (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) are considered non-EQF third countries for the purposes of this study.
- This study also considers the United Kingdom during the period up to the entry into force of the Withdrawal Agreement (1 February 2020).
- In addition, the study includes in its analysis non-EQF third countries (third countries not involved in the EQF process), looking at how the EQF has contributed to the better understanding of qualifications from non-EQF third countries.

The study covers the period from 1 June 2017 to 1 June 2022, and focuses on the provisions of the revised EQF Recommendation as adopted in 2017. However, given the high level of continuity between the 2008 and 2017 Council Recommendations and the availability of existing evidence (especially the 2013 evaluation<sup>35</sup>), the analysis of certain provisions includes developments prior to 2017.

The study applied mixed-methods approaches to data collection and analysis, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods into an overall analytical approach guided by a comprehensive evaluation framework. The methods used were as follows (more details on the study's methodology are presented in Annex 1):

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<sup>34</sup> The designation XK / Kosovo is used without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

<sup>35</sup> Devaux, A. et al. – ICF GHK (2013). Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation – Final report.

- **Exploratory interviews** were carried out, with the aim of fine-tuning the operationalisation of evaluation questions; identifying key stakeholders relevant to the EQF; informing the design of the questionnaires used for the targeted online survey and public consultations; and identifying key themes and trends for the case studies. Eight exploratory interviews were implemented in total (six of them with European Training Foundation (ETF), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and EQF AG representatives from France, Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands, as well as two with DG EMPL).
- **Mapping and desk research** aimed to provide a detailed overview of the state of implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The existing knowledge base (including academic literature) on the implementation of the Recommendation was reviewed, and information was mapped concerning the progress of implementation in the 38 participating countries and at EU level, as well the baseline situation in 2017, to identify the progress made between 2017 and 2022. In addition, mapping and desk research provided a wider context for the study.
- **A targeted online survey** (hereafter: “the survey”) aimed to gather experiences, opinions and suggestions regarding the 2017 EQF Recommendation from stakeholders who were involved in the implementation of the EQF and/or who benefit from it. The survey was open for responses from 9 September to 24 October 2022. In total, 122 responses were received, out of which 102 were complete and 20 were partial<sup>36</sup>. More details about how the survey was implemented and an overview of the respondents are provided in Annex 1.
- **Interviews** were carried out to explore reflections at European level on the evaluation criteria in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. These interviews focused exclusively on the EU/international level, and served to explore the development of the EQF at EU level in greater depth (including governance, coherence, added value, etc.). Interviews mostly targeted gaps that remained after mapping and desk research. In all, 21 interviews were carried out with a selection of EQF AG members, EQF National Coordination Points (NCPs), international qualifications experts and representatives of non-EQF third countries between 11 January and 21 February 2023. The list of interviewees is presented in Annex 1.
- **Case studies** were carried out with the aim of providing a more in-depth analysis of selected aspects of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This allowed evaluation questions relating to certain aspects (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance) to be answered in greater detail). In addition, the case studies enabled a better understanding of how different national contexts have influenced the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The case studies highlight specific experiences in relation to effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value and relevance of selected activities under the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Overall, 10 case studies were carried out, covering 15 countries. The results of the case studies are available in Annex 4. Each of the 10 thematic case studies takes into account the findings from desk research/country mapping, survey results, as well as consultations in selected countries. In total, inputs from 131 national stakeholders were received through individual or group interviews. The numbers of consultations per case, per country, and per stakeholder type are provided in Annex 1.

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<sup>36</sup> Partial responses were analysed together with the complete responses. As a result, the total number of responses differs between questions. Only those responses in which at least one question was answered from the main part of the questionnaire were considered as partial and analysed. To avoid situations in which a partial response was submitted by a respondent who also provided a full response, the Alchemer™ tool was used to check that only one response had been submitted from the same device. No instances were identified in which a partial and a complete response were submitted from the same device; thus, all partial responses can be considered valid, unique responses.



- **Public consultation** (hereafter, PC) aimed to gather opinions from all stakeholders, (but particularly those less directly involved in the EQF implementation process and/or active users of the EQF) and gain additional insights about the EQF and 2017 EQF Recommendation. The PC was launched on December 14 and was open until March 22. It received 267 responses.
- **A validation workshop** was held to present the study findings to key EQF stakeholders for discussion and validation, as well as to gather ideas for the study's lessons learned. The workshop was held on 17 April 2023, and brought together 24 representatives of EU and national-level stakeholders and experts on qualifications (EQF AG members, EQF NCPs, social partners, representatives of the ETF and DG EMPL). The study's conclusions and lessons learned, which are discussed in Chapter 5 of this report, were validated by workshop participants and incorporate insights gathered during this workshop.

The following conceptual aspects should be taken into consideration when reading this report:

- The 2017 EQF Recommendation was a continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. As a result, it is not always possible to attribute certain impacts solely to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, even though this is the ultimate aim of the present study. In such instances, the study assesses the impacts of the EQF as a whole. Where relevant, this report clearly states when it is discussing the impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and when it is discussing impacts of the EQF as a whole. This is mainly the case when assessing recommendations from the 2017 EQF Recommendation which are continuation or codify existing practice of the 2008 EQF Recommendation.
- The study focuses on analysing the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Thus, its scope is limited to that of the EQF tool. However, it is not possible to entirely disentangle the role of the EQF from those of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). The EQF and NQFs are interconnected because each NQF should be linked to the EQF. Thus, the EQF cannot exist without the NQFs. As a result, the EQF and its impact relies on the implementation, quality and accuracy of the NQFs. Hence, it was challenging for the study team to assess the EQF without also assessing each NQF. Where relevant, the study goes beyond the scope of the EQF and discusses NQFs. In addition, where a clear impact of the EQF cannot be assessed, this is specified in the analysis.
- The objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are currently defined in such a way that they cannot be measured in a quantifiable manner. This makes it difficult to say to what extent its wider and specific objectives have been achieved (e.g. in the absence of a clear link to an operational objective or a monitoring indicator, it is not clear what it means to fully achieve the specific objective "facilitating lifelong learning"). Attempts have therefore been made, where possible, to provide qualifiers such as "to the full extent", "to a large extent", "to a small extent", etc. Stakeholder perceptions, where relevant, were also used to provide qualification.

The study faced certain limitations in the collection of data. These were mitigated in order to provide robust findings, as explained below:

- The factual information provided by the desk research and country mapping included **limited detail on national particularities**, which was gathered additionally via the case studies. Given the limited geographical scope of these case studies, the analysis provides a deep dive into the national contexts of only 15 countries, while information about the national particularities of the remaining countries is

mostly based on EU-level reports and is thus less detailed. **To mitigate this**, relying on insights from the case studies and data triangulation, the study team tried to draw an overarching hypothesis and conclusion regarding the remaining EQF countries. In instances where this was not possible, country case studies were used to illustrate concrete findings instead of drawing overarching conclusions.

- The EQF is a complex subject requiring good knowledge of the field of education and training and qualifications. Hence, only a **limited number of stakeholders can provide feedback** regarding its effectiveness, efficiency and relevance – and different stakeholders possess knowledge about different aspects of the EQF. In addition, the survey was thus challenging to complete from a respondent's perspective. **To mitigate this**, the study team designed the questionnaire using everyday language; provided definitions to achieve a uniform interpretation of questions; aimed to keep the questions direct, short and clear; and used 'skip logic' to ensure that respondents would only see those questions that were relevant to them. Furthermore, it was possible to complete the survey as a group, ensuring informative and well-founded responses. The 122 responses received offer high added value, as they were received from key stakeholders (mostly public authorities, but also end beneficiaries as well as education and training providers), and came from across all EQF countries except Montenegro and Kosovo.
- Respondents who know about the EQF were more likely to respond to the survey and the PC, thus leading to **self-selection bias**. Hence, questions concerning awareness were unlikely to be representative of the views of the general population. **To mitigate this**, possible bias was taken into account in the analysis when interpreting the results of the survey and PC.
- The existing sources provide limited evidence with which to assess the costs associated with running NCPs and supporting the implementation of the EQF at national level. **To mitigate this**, some information about costs was collected as part of the survey and interviews. Furthermore, due to this limited data, costs have in most cases not been quantified. Instead, categories of costs are given, along with explanations of the relevant cost drivers.

The present study and the structure of this report closely follow the Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox. Following on from the introduction, the second chapter of the report sets the scene and offers some background on the EQF evaluation, providing an overview of the key provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its intervention logic. Chapter 3 of the report presents the ways in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been implemented. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 presents the study's conclusions and lessons learned for further EU action relevant to the context of the EQF. In addition, the following annexes are attached to this report:

1. Annex 1. Detailed methodological approach
2. Annex 2. Case study reports
3. Annex 3. Summary table of the cost-benefit analysis
4. Annex 4. Consultation synopsis report
5. Annex 5. Report on the validation workshop
6. Annex 6. Intervention logic of EQF
7. Annex 7. Evaluation matrix

**8.** Annex 8. List of sources used

## 2. What was the expected outcome of the intervention?

### 2.1. The European Qualifications Framework

The development of the European Qualifications Framework has its origins in the ambitions defined in the Lisbon strategy to make the EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’<sup>37</sup>. Doing so would require increased investments in education and training systems, enabling these to better adapt to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. In addition, the Lisbon strategy identified a need to foster lifelong learning by strengthening the links between qualifications systems across Europe.

To support all of these objectives, the European Qualifications Framework was formalised through the 2008 EQF Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council (**2008 EQF Recommendation**)<sup>38</sup>, which provides for a common reference framework of eight generic European levels of learning. This adopts a learning outcomes approach, which serves as a “translation grid” between national qualifications systems. As a translation tool, it does not concern itself with the ways in which countries structure and prioritise education and training policies, but offers the means to make these more transparent. To do so, qualifications are not directly referenced to levels in the EQF. Instead, qualifications have a place within their national qualifications systems, which are referenced to the EQF at system level. As such, the EQF aims to facilitate comparability between qualifications and education systems, and to provide a common point of reference that enables the recognition and transferability of qualifications<sup>39</sup>.

The 2008 EQF Recommendation specifically invited Member States to reference their qualifications systems and levels to the EQF levels by 2010. Furthermore, MS were invited to indicate the corresponding EQF levels for newly issued certificates/diplomas and or certificate/diploma supplements by 2012. A 2013 assessment<sup>40</sup> found that these milestones were not fully met, and also highlighted substantial variations that persisted between countries in terms of descriptions of the content of similar qualifications – thus imposing limitations on the comparability and transferability of qualifications<sup>41</sup>. It was highlighted that the existing guidance in certain work areas required clarification or refinement in order to strengthen the implementation and functioning of the EQF.

### 2.2. Description of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its objectives

To address the evolving challenges and continue the work initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the Council adopted a revised Recommendation on the EQF in 2017, which repealed and replaced the Recommendation of 2008 (**2017 EQF Recommendation**)<sup>42</sup>. At its core, the 2017 EQF Recommendation represents a

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<sup>37</sup> See Lisbon European Council (2000), [Presidency conclusions](#).

<sup>38</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (Text with EEA relevance) OJ C 111, 6.5.2008.

<sup>39</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (Text with EEA relevance) OJ C 111, 6.5.2008.

<sup>40</sup> ICF (2013), Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation

<sup>41</sup> European Commission COM(2016) 383 final, pp. 3-5.

<sup>42</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).

continuation of the core processes begun in 2008, as well as a refinement of existing guidance. This was complemented by the codification of existing practices into the legal text, and the introduction of a limited number of new areas. As such, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has the same wider objectives as its predecessor<sup>43</sup>, namely:

- **To contribute to the modernisation of education and training systems**, by placing a focus on learning outcomes and the flexibility of learning pathways.
- **To increase employability** by giving access to jobs, mobility across sectoral and geographical borders (e.g. by enabling the better assessment of qualifications), and contribute to the social integration of workers and learners.

These wider objectives are aligned with Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which lay down the competences for the EU to encourage cooperation among the Member States with regard to improving the quality of education. By supporting such cooperation, the EU contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which requires that all UN Member States “**ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**”<sup>44</sup>.

The specific objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are identified as follows:

- **Improving the transparency, comparability and portability of people’s qualifications**, by building trust and facilitating the understanding and recognition of qualifications.
- **Facilitating lifelong learning**, for instance by better linking formal, non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes acquired in different settings.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation pursues these objectives through nine recommendations addressed to EU Member States, six recommendations addressed to the European Commission in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders within the EQF AG, and four recommendations specifically addressed to the European Commission. These recommendations can be grouped thematically into the following broad categories, each of which is structured into more specific sub-themes in Table 1 and Section 2.3 of this report:

- **Strengthening the implementation of the EQF.**
- **Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning.**
- **Linking common principles (for quality assurance and credit systems) to qualifications with an EQF level.**
- **Increasing the outreach of NQFs / the EQF to different stakeholders.**
- **Consolidating the role of EQF AG members within the governance structure.**

The specific provisions in the 2017 Recommendation that link to each of the categories above are presented in Table 1. For each of the Recommendation’s provisions, the table also specifies to what extent these are a direct continuation of the 2008 EQF

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<sup>43</sup> The study reconstructed the Recommendation’s intervention logic on the basis of implicit considerations in the preamble to the Recommendation, interviews with European Commission officials, and the Commission explanatory memorandum (COM(2016)-383). It is important to underline that the supporting document did not explicitly define general, specific or operational objectives, but instead refers to ‘wider’ objectives. These ‘wider objectives’ can be understood as general objectives within the meaning of the Better Regulation Guidelines, in the sense that these closest to the ‘treaty-based objectives that the policy aims to contribute to’, and are not specific enough to serve as objectives for what the Recommendation can be expected to achieve.

<sup>44</sup> United Nations website for the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals#>

Recommendation, a codification of existing practices, a fine-tuning of existing guidance, or an entirely new provision<sup>45</sup>. The rationale for each of these classifications is provided in detail in Section 2.3. This classification provides an indication as to the extent of the observable effects expected for each of the Recommendation’s provisions. The effects of those provisions that mark a change from the 2008 Recommendation (i.e. new provisions and the fine-tuning of existing guidance) are expected to be bigger.

**Table 1. EQF Recommendation provisions – grouped by thematic links**

Implementation theme	Sub-theme	Comparison to 2008 EQF Recommendation	Text in 2017 EQF Recommendation <sup>46</sup>
<b>Strengthening the implementation of the EQF</b>	Referencing	Codifying existing practice	MS1a. Use the EQF to reference [NQF] [...], in particular by referencing their qualification levels to levels of the EQF set out in Annex II and by using the criteria set out in Annex III.
	Updates	Codifying existing practice	MS2. Review and update the referencing of the levels of the [NQF] to the levels of the EQF set out in Annex II and using the criteria set out in Annex III.
	Supporting the consistent use of learning outcomes	Continuation <sup>47</sup>	EC/AG 9. Comparing and discussing methodologies used for the levelling of qualifications in [NQF] [...].
		Continuation	EC/AG 10. [...] Support the development of methodologies for the description, use and application of learning outcomes to increase transparency, understanding and comparability of qualifications.
Criteria / procedures for non-EQF third country qualifications frameworks (QFs)	New	EC/AG 13. Explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable [...] the comparison of non-EQF third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF.	
<b>Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning</b>	Qualifications outside the formal domain	Codifying existing practice	MS1b. [...] Compare all types and levels of qualifications in the Union that are part of [NQF] in particular by referencing their qualification levels to levels of the EQF set out in Annex II and by using the criteria set out in Annex III.
	Allocation of levels to international qualifications	Fine-tuning existing provisions	EC/AG 11. Support the setting up of voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications through [NQF] and information exchange and consultation between Member States on those procedures to ensure consistency.
<b>Linking common principles (for</b>	References to quality assurance	Fine-tuning existing provisions	MS3. Ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common

<sup>45</sup> For the purposes of the study, ‘codifying existing practice’ entails no actual visible change in practice. Existing practices are merely formalised into the Recommendation’s text. This means it lies close to ‘continuation’, and may sometimes be interpreted as such, depending on one’s personal interpretation of the specific wording in the 2008 Recommendation. Conversely, ‘refining existing guidance’ is understood to imply a change in practices, which may be small or more substantial, but is at least visible in comparison to the pre 2017 period.

<sup>46</sup> For presentational purposes, the texts have been slightly reworded. In particular, more legal wording has been removed / replaced (indicated by [...]), to better highlight the overall intention of the Recommendation. The exact wording can be found by looking up the relevant provision number in the [Official Journal](#). For instance, all instances of “national qualifications frameworks or systems” are replaced by “NQF”. Similarly, additions such as ‘where relevant / appropriate’ or ‘without prejudice to national rules / principles’, are not included, but can be read for all recommendations, given that MS are only invited to implement these recommendations where this is considered appropriate. The prefix MS indicates the recommendation was addressed to Member States; EC/AG indicates to the European Commission, in cooperation with Member States in the Advisory Group; and EC refers to European Commission

<sup>47</sup> This sub-theme can be classified both as “continuation” and “codification of existing practice”, depending on the interpretation of the specific wording of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. The study team chose to use “continuation” due to its own interpretation of the core mandate for the EC in the EQF 2008 Recommendation to support Member States in comparing and discussing methodologies used for the levelling of qualifications. The 2008 EQF Recommendation does not use such specific wording and this is a subjective own interpretation of the study team. Therefore, it is also correct to classify this sub-theme as “codification of existing practice”.

Implementation theme	Sub-theme	Comparison to 2008 EQF Recommendation	Text in 2017 EQF Recommendation <sup>46</sup>
quality assurance and credit systems) to qualifications with an EQF level	Linking of credit systems to EQF/NQF	Codifying existing practice	principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV, [...]. MS4. [...] Promote links between credit systems and NQF taking into account the common principles on credit systems set out in Annex V, [...] to (i) make use of credit systems; and (ii) relate them to [NQF] [...].
		Codifying existing practice	MS5. [...] Take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents by the competent authorities [...], and/or registers of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level. EC/AG 12. Develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued [qualification documents], and/or registers of qualifications [...].
Increasing the outreach of NQF / EQF to different stakeholders	Availability of information on the levels of qualifications	Codifying existing practice	MS5. [...] Take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents by the competent authorities [...], and/or registers of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.
		Codifying existing practice	EC/AG 12. Develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued [qualification documents], and/or registers of qualifications [...].
	Availability of information about the contents of qualifications	Fine-tuning existing provisions	MS6b. Ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published, using the data fields in accordance with Annex VI.
	Availability of information on the NQF	Fine-tuning existing provisions	MS6a. Make the results of the referencing process publicly available at national and Union levels
	Use by different stakeholders	Continuation	MS7. Encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities to support the comparison of qualifications and transparency of the learning outcomes.
Governance / modality for implementation	Advisory Group	Continuation	MS8. Ensure the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCP [...].
		Continuation	EC16. Ensure an effective governance of the EQF implementation by maintaining and fully supporting the EQF Advisory Group established in 2009 [...].
		Continuation	EC/AG14. Set up peer learning and best practice exchanges between the Member States and, where appropriate, facilitate peer counselling at the request of the Member States.
	Funds	Continuation	EC/AG15. Ensure that the implementation of this recommendation is supported through actions funded by relevant Union programmes.
	Monitoring and evaluation	Continuation	EC17. Report on progress following the adoption of this recommendation, as appropriate, in the context of relevant education, training and employment policy frameworks.
		Continuation	EC18. Assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, action taken in response to this recommendation [...].

Source: compiled by the Visionary Analytics consortium based on the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

For each of the themes identified, a number of immediate outputs can be defined that measure the level of implementation by the Member States, the EQF AG and European Commission, each of which are designated as key actors in the implementation of the Recommendation. Such outputs express, for instance, the number of Member States that have implemented specific recommendations within their countries, as well as the number of studies or activities undertaken. These are identified in more detail below, and are presented in comparison to the situation at the time the 2017 EQF Recommendation was

adopted. Chapter 3 then goes on to review the implementation of the various provisions of the Recommendation since its adoption in 2017.

The defined outputs are expected to lead to a series of measurable results indicating the extent to which the transparency, comparability and portability of people’s qualifications has improved, as well as the extent to which lifelong learning has been facilitated. Together, the inputs, activities, outputs and results are intended to contribute to the EQF’s wider objectives of supporting the modernisation of education and training systems and contributing to employability, mobility across sectoral and geographical borders, and the social integration of workers and learners. The extent to which these expected results and impacts were achieved is assessed in further detail in Chapter 4, under the heading of ‘Effectiveness’.

## 2.3. What was the situation prior to 2017?

### 2.3.1. Strengthening the implementation of the EQF

#### Referencing

The referencing of a national qualifications framework or system to the EQF is the first and most visible step countries can take towards implementing the EQF. The 2017 EQF Recommendation invites all Member States to reference their qualifications systems to the EQF, and to follow the EQF levels in Annex II and the referencing criteria from Annex III. Implementation of this recommendation can be measured by reviewing the **number of NQFs that are referenced to the EQF**.

By 2017, 34 NQFs had already been referenced to the EQF (26 NQFs in the EU, and eight NQFs outside the EU) on the basis of referencing criteria defined by the EQF AG in 2011 and updated in 2013<sup>48</sup>. These identical referencing criteria are now explicitly included in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and are therefore classified as codifying existing practice in Table 1. This leaves an additional six NQFs (three in the EU, and three outside the EU) to be referenced after 2017.

**Table 2. Overview of NQFs with referencing to the EQF in 2017**

	EU-27	Non-EU
<b>Referencing completed before the end of 2017</b>	AT, BE [nl], BE [fr], BG, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PT, PL, SE, SI, SK	CH, IS, LI, ME, MK, NO, TR, XK
<b>Referencing not completed by 2017</b>	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS
<b>Total completed</b>	26/29 <sup>49</sup>	8/11

Note: BE[nl], BE[fr], and BE[de] refer to communities speaking different languages in Belgium: Dutch speaking community (BE[nl]), French speaking community (BE[fr]) and German speaking community (BE[de]).

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2017)<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> European Union (2011), Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (Note 3) and European Union (2013), [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>49</sup> Education in Belgium is a community-competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>50</sup> Note on the United Kingdom: the UK withdrew from the EU in February 2020; since then, the UK has no longer been part of the EQF process. Information on the UK is therefore not included in the table.



## Updates

The 2017 EQF Recommendation calls on Member States to review and update the referencing of the levels whenever the referencing report no longer faithfully reflects their national qualifications framework or system<sup>51</sup>. To assess the implementation of this provision, the study reviews the **number of updates to referencing reports that have taken place since 2017**.

While the explicit provision regarding updates in the 2017 EQF Recommendation is new, updates to existing referencing reports had already been requested by the AG since 2011, and more explicitly in the revised guidance of 2013<sup>52</sup>. For this reason, provisions relating to this are classified in Table 1 as 'Codifying existing practice'. In view of the relatively limited time that had passed since the referencing was completed for most EQF countries, most referencing reports can be assumed to continue to 'faithfully reflect the national situations'. Therefore, only a limited number of countries can be expected to have submitted updates to their referencing during the evaluation period since 2017.

## Supporting the consistent use of learning outcomes

The use of learning outcomes is a core principle of the EQF, and serves as the crucial translation key that allows qualifications and qualifications systems to be compared. It allows the users of qualifications to move beyond qualification levels and offers transparent information about the core content of qualifications, opening up opportunities for comparison beyond a single system. For this reason, the 2017 EQF Recommendation continues the mandate for the AG/EC to support MS in developing methodologies for the description, use and application of learning outcomes when defining and describing qualifications (i.e. classified in Table 1 as a continuation).

Consistent implementation of a learning outcomes approach depends on a shared understanding of what this means for levelling decisions and referencing. This understanding is fostered by the Commission through studies and support at EU level. Implementation since 2017 is therefore assessed according to the **number of publications** that offer insights into referencing / levelling approaches; the **number of meetings** at which referencing reports / updates were presented; and the **number of peer-learning events / project groups / other learning activities** organised on this subject since 2017. In the period prior to 2017, during which activities were carried out under the mandate of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the EQF AG produced a detailed guidance note in 2011 presenting various practices for the application and use of learning outcomes across Europe<sup>53</sup>. An evaluation of the EQF in 2013 highlighted that at the time, the use of learning outcomes, together with EQF implementation, remained a work in progress. While a considerable body of evidence produced by Cedefop shows the use of the EQF in vocational education and training (VET)<sup>54</sup>, there is less evidence regarding its use in other educational sectors, particularly in general education<sup>55</sup>. Based on additional work and the continued sharing of experiences in multiple peer-learning activities, in 2017 Cedefop published a comprehensive handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes<sup>56</sup>. A working group within the AG was convened between 2015 and 2017 to work on the horizontal comparison of the learning outcomes. To pilot this approach, two specific technical

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<sup>51</sup> EQF Advisory Group (2017), Note 43-4.

<sup>52</sup> European Union (2011), Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (Note 3) and European Union (2013), Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (Note 5).

<sup>53</sup> European Union (2011), Using learning outcomes: European Qualifications Framework Series: [Note 4](#).

<sup>54</sup> Cedefop (2016), [Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office.

Cedefop (2014), [Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to Higher Education](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office.

Cedefop (2013), [The role of qualifications in governing occupations and professions](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office.

Cedefop (2012), [Curriculum reform in Europe](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop (2010), [Changing qualifications](#),

Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop (2009), [The shift to learning outcomes](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<sup>55</sup> European Commission (2016), A new Skills Agenda for Europe: Annex III Revision of the EQF, [SWD\(2016\)\\_195 final](#), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Cedefop (2017). [Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office.

qualifications<sup>57</sup> were selected, in order to address the question of consistency in the allocation of levels to qualifications across countries.

The paragraphs above show various developments prior to 2017, and the efforts that were already being made to promote the consistent use of learning outcomes. By 2017, however, the methodologies developed and ways in which levelling criteria were applied still differed considerably from country to country – particularly with regard to the interpretation and application of the principle of learning outcomes<sup>58</sup> – thus leaving scope for further development in the post-2017 period.

### Criteria/procedures for qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries

The 2017 EQF Recommendation calls for first steps to be taken to explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures that would enable comparisons with qualifications and qualifications frameworks from non-EQF third countries or regions. As outputs in this area, the present study reviews the **number and types of activities undertaken** to facilitate comparisons with the qualifications frameworks of non-EQF third countries.

While introduced as a new provision in the 2017 EQF Recommendation (see Table 1), cooperation with non-EQF third countries or regions outside the EU on an individual level was already taking place prior to this point, though not always in an institutionalised way<sup>59</sup>. The 2013 evaluation recommended the clarification of the role of the EQF with regard to qualifications from non-EQF third countries. This recommendation was subsequently taken up by the EQF AG in 2014, with the setting-up of three pilot projects exploring comparability between the EQF and three mature qualifications frameworks – namely, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF)<sup>60</sup>. The findings of these pilots formed the basis for the inclusion into the 2017 EQF Recommendation of a recommendation for further cooperation with the qualifications frameworks of non-EQF third countries.

#### 2.3.2. Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning

### Qualifications outside formal education

The 2017 EQF Recommendation suggests that Member States should enable the comparison of all types and levels of qualifications that are part of NQFs by referencing their levels to the EQF – which could include qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training system. Even where such qualifications outside the formal domain are not included directly into an NQF, a link to the NQF can be made by having validation arrangements in place. For this reason, the referencing criteria in the 2017 EQF Recommendation call for the establishment of such links to enable validation. This provision was part of the referencing criteria used since 2011, which is why it has been classified by the present study as a codifying of existing practice in Table 1. As outputs of these activities, the study assesses the **number of NQFs that broadened their scope** (in terms of types

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<sup>57</sup> Chmielecka, E. – IBE (2018). [Horizontal comparisons of levelled qualifications project](#), presented at EQF conference on supporting learning, work and cross-border activity, 15-16 March 2018.

The AG working group focused on CNC operation and technical engineer. The project was led by Poland and some key results can be found [here](#).

<sup>58</sup> EQF Advisory Group (2017), Note 41-3, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#).

<sup>60</sup> European Commission (2016), A new Skills Agenda for Europe: Annex III Revision of the EQF, [SWD\(2016\)\\_195 final](#), p. 20.

of qualifications, educational sectors or other changes), compared with the pre-2017 situation.

Cedefop reports that in the years prior to 2017, countries had prioritised the inclusion into NQFs of qualifications offered within the formal education and training system (VET, Higher Education (HE), general education qualifications), with less attention being given to qualifications awarded by labour market stakeholders and adult learning providers<sup>61</sup>. This is reflected in the limited number of countries that introduced criteria and procedures to directly include into their NQFs qualifications resulting from non-formal education and training. As shown in Table 3 below, such broadening of NQFs took place in eight MS, as well as one country outside the EU.

**Table 3. Overview of NQFs and inclusion of qualifications outside formal education in 2017**

	EU-27	Non-EU
<b>NQFs that included qualifications outside formal education by 2017</b>	DK, FR, MT, NL, PL, SE, SI, SK	XK
<b>No known developments towards including non-formal qualifications into NQFs by 2017</b>	AT, BE (nl), BE (fr), BG, CY, CZ, DE, EE, EL, FI, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, PT	CH, IS, LI, ME, MK, NO, TR,
<b>Referencing not completed by 2017</b>	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS
<b>Total completed</b>	8/29 <sup>62</sup>	1/11

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on NQF developments in European countries (2019)<sup>63</sup>.

## Allocation of levels to international qualifications

International qualifications refer to those qualifications awarded by private (sectoral) and international organisations and bodies. As such, these qualifications can be found in similar or identical forms across more than one country. Generally, these qualifications are awarded outside the formal system. The 2017 EQF Recommendation recommended that voluntary procedures be developed to encourage a consistent levelling for such qualifications. Its provisions largely follow those of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, which similarly drew attention to the levelling of international (sectoral) organisations but did not specify how<sup>64</sup>. Its explicit inclusion in the 2017 EQF Recommendation is therefore classified as a fine-tuning of an existing provision (see Table 1). The Recommendation specifies that in order to have an EQF level, international qualifications need to be included in at least one NQF. Implementation of this recommendation can be assessed according to whether any such **levelling procedures have been developed** at EU level, and have been tested by Member States during the period under review, as well as the extent to which **a system for information exchange** has been formalised.

In 2016, a total of eight NQFs (including those from seven MS) were reported to have national procedures in place for including international qualifications (similar to those used to include other qualifications outside the formal system)<sup>65</sup>. While this offers some insight

<sup>61</sup> Cedefop (2018), [National qualifications framework developments in Europe Analysis and overview 2015-16](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office, p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>63</sup> Systematic information on the inclusion of qualifications outside formal education were not included in earlier iterations of Cedefop's work on NQFs. For this reason, the report from 2019, based on data collected in 2018, is used as starting point. Countries with NQFs that were identified as being open to non-formal qualifications were reviewed in greater depth to determine whether this situation had already been the case in 2017.

<sup>64</sup> The 2008 EQF Recommendation states in its pre-amble (12) that "The European Qualifications Framework should, moreover, enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualification systems to a common European reference point".

<sup>65</sup> BG, FR, NL, PT, SI and SK, based on European Commission (2016), [Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems](#). The study also refers to BA and LT, which self-reported in the study's questionnaire that such

concerning the baseline in 2017, this value cannot be taken as a comparison point due to methodological differences and being based on self-reporting. Moreover, each of these procedures is restricted to its own national context, and did not provide for information exchange or consultation with others in order to solve possible differences in the level allocated. The work conducted up to 2017 was mostly exploratory, with European financial support being provided for pilot projects to review experiences and bottlenecks when using the EQF for specific sectoral qualifications – for instance, with regard to international qualifications in financial services (2009) and for hairdressers (2011)<sup>66</sup>. The AG established a dedicated sub-group on International Sectoral Qualifications in 2014, which was also supported by studies conducted by Cedefop and the European Commission during this period<sup>67</sup>.

### 2.3.3. Linking common principles (for quality assurance and credit systems) to qualifications with an EQF level

#### References to quality assurance

The 2017 EQF Recommendation introduces common principles for quality assurance, and recommends that Member States ensure these principles are applied to *qualifications with an EQF level*. Compared with the 2008 EQF Recommendation, this constitutes a change in terms of both structure (focusing on qualifications instead of qualifications systems) and scope (now covering all qualifications with an EQF level, as opposed to only VET/HE qualifications)<sup>68</sup>. This constitutes a clear change from 2008, though not necessarily as a new provision; it is therefore classified in Table 1 as refining existing guidance<sup>69</sup>. The principles in Annex IV continue to be aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, and with European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET). While these principles are designed to cover all qualifications within an NQF in accordance with national circumstances, general education is specifically mentioned as an exceptional category to which the principles may not apply. The review of the implementation of this recommendation, therefore, focuses on the **number of countries that have taken additional policy actions** in relation to quality assurance for qualifications. Particular attention is given to the extent to which such actions have focused on qualifications in general education and in non-formal education.

The 2013 evaluation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation found that quality assurance in education and training was increasingly considered a priority across the EU<sup>70</sup>. More specifically, it found that increasing attention had been given to the implementation of European standards and guidelines in HE and VET (included as the quality assurance principles of the EQF). However, quality assurance systems are not uniform for entire qualifications frameworks, and tend to be structured according to sub-systems. Due to this

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procedures were under development; BA also did not complete the referencing process for its NQF by 2017. BG and PT self-reported in the study that provisions had been put in place for international qualifications; possibly, these refer to arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, given that these two countries do not include qualifications outside the formal domain within their NQFs directly.

<sup>66</sup> EQF-Hair Partnership (2009). Guidance principles on the use of EQF in the hairdressing sector. Copenhagen, Dansk Frisør & Kosmetiker Forbund. Equalifise (European Qualification Assurance League in Financial Services). 2010. Methodological report on levelling qualifications in the Financial Services Sector against the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

<sup>67</sup> Cedefop (2012). International qualifications, Luxembourg : Publications Office. European Commission (2016), Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems.

<sup>68</sup> Prior to 2017, the EQF quality assurance principles focused on the system level, and only explicitly included references to qualifications in VET and higher education. They did not explicitly mention general education and non-formal and informal learning, though it can be argued that these principles apply equally to these types of qualifications, as long as these are included in NQFs. From this perspective, it can be concluded that this provision in fact is mostly a continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, and offers a fine-tuning / clarification of existing provisions.

<sup>69</sup> Each item mentioned in Annex IV of the 2017 recommendations is covered at least to some extent by an item in Annex III of the 2008 Recommendation, which applies system-level quality assurance with the aim of achieving the same level of quality standards in individual qualifications.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission / ICF (2013). Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, p. 58.

fragmentation, existing quality assurance processes and principles are not easily mapped or reported on at EU level. This is also because quality assurance (QA) processes are often at least partly based on implicit agreements and processes that could not be compared systematically<sup>71</sup>. Therefore, no European-wide overview could be provided as to which quality criteria are respected in which education sectors and countries.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, there is no systematic overview of the situation in the field of quality assurance for qualifications prior to 2017. What material does exist focuses solely on individual education sectors, and is limited to different points in time. It can be summarised as follows:

- Specifically in relation to VET, an existing study found that in 2013, 24 Member States already had EQAVET-conform quality assurance systems for VET in place. By 2018, only the quality assurance system for the French Community in Belgium was still under development<sup>73</sup>.
- In HE, a 2011 review established that the ESG were widely implemented and used across various contexts, and that future work could focus on further clarifying the terminology used, as well as further raising awareness<sup>74</sup>.
- In general education, a broad 2015 review of quality assurance systems in primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels concluded that even though QA activities exist to some extent, most EU countries do not refer to such activities consistently as quality assurance<sup>75</sup>. While the majority of EU countries focus on quality assurance with regard to learning outcomes, teachers and school contexts, these efforts are not consistently and coherently linked.
- A 2013 review of qualifications in the domain of non-formal provision shows that quality assurance systems are not consistently in place<sup>76</sup>. While qualifications in NQF are generally quality-assured, non-formal provision outside such frameworks in particular depends more on bottom-up approaches to quality assurance, which are not always consistently documented or comparable.

## Linking of credit systems to the EQF/NQFs

The 2017 EQF Recommendation calls upon Member States to promote links between credit systems and NQFs, and provides underlying principles indicating what such credit systems could look like. Even though this provision and these principles had not previously featured in the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the linking of credit systems to NQFs has been on the EQF agenda since the first publication of guidance on referencing criteria in 2011<sup>77</sup>. Moreover, the principles introduced in the 2017 EQF Recommendation are in fact aligned with developments surrounding the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the 2009 Recommendation on the establishment of a European Credit system for VET (ECVET)<sup>78</sup>. For this reason, this provision is categorised as a codification of existing practice in Table 1, Section 2.2 of this report. The implementation of this provision can be reviewed by looking at the number of MS that offer increased opportunities for the accumulation/transfer of

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<sup>71</sup> European Union (2013). [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>72</sup> This is also the conclusion of the EQF AG horizontal comparisons working group, for instance, which underlined the wide diversity of quality assurance mechanisms and stakeholders involved even when only looking at EQF levels 4 to 6. Extending such an analysis in a systematic way for all qualifications would need to overcome the fact that qualifications are offered by different education sectors (general education, VET, HE, AL), and also cover qualifications offered by non-formal sectors that are usually less well regulated and subject to less government supervision than formal qualifications.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission (2019). Study on EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET).

<sup>74</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in HE (2011). [Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG](#) (MAP-ESG Project), Brussels.

<sup>75</sup> European Commission (2015). [Comparative study on quality assurance in EU school education systems: policies, procedures and practices](#), Publications Office, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Panteia (2013). [Developing the adult learning sector Quality in the Adult Learning Sector](#) (Lot 1), p. 28.

<sup>77</sup> European Union (2011). Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (Note 3).

<sup>78</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), [OJ C 155/02](#) pp.11-18.

learning outcomes across different learning contexts since 2017, which is operationalised by looking at the **number of countries that have linked credit systems for education (sub-)systems to their NQFs**.

In 2017, around half of MS had linked credit systems in specific sectors of education to their NQFs when completing their referencing exercise. Most often, links were made for HE (14 MS; six non-EU countries) and VET (10 MS; four non-EU countries) (for more information, see Table 4 below). For other sectors (general education and those outside formal education), no such EU overviews are available.

**Table 4. Overview of NQFs with and without credit systems linked to them (by sub-system) in 2017**

	Credit system in VET related to NQF		Credit systems in HE related to NQF	
	EU-27	Non-EU	EU-27	Non-EU
<b>Credit systems linked to NQF by 2017</b>	BG, HR, EE, FI, FR, IE, LU, MT, PT, SI	IS, MK, ME, XK	BE [nl], BE [fr], BG, HR, DK, EE, FI, FR, IE, LV, LU, MT, SI, SK	IS, LI, MK, ME, NO, XK
<b>No explicit link to NQF by 2017</b>	AT, BE [nl], BE [fr], CY, CZ, DE, DK, EL, HU, IT, NL, LT, LV, PL, SE, SK	CH, LI, NO, TR	AT, CY, CZ, DE, EL, HU, IT, NL, LT, PL, PT, SE	CH, TR
<b>Referencing not complete by 2017</b>	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS
<b>Total completed</b>	10/29 <sup>79</sup>	4/11	14/29 <sup>80</sup>	6/11

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on NQF developments in European countries (2017).

### 2.3.4. Increasing the outreach of NQF/EQF to different stakeholders

#### Availability of information on the levels of qualifications

Information about the EQF level that corresponds with a particular individual qualification helps recipients of these qualifications to position their qualification in both a national and a European context. Presenting this information for all individual qualifications awarded has been a key aim of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, and was retained as a recommendation in the 2017 EQF Recommendation (Table 1 therefore classifies this as a continuation). In the 2017 Recommendation, it has been expanded to also include the EQF level for individual qualifications in *registers of qualifications*. In addition, the 2017 Recommendation calls upon the Commission and the EQF AG to provide additional guidance to Member States on how EQF levels can be presented on qualification documents (classified as a continuation in Table 1, because this was already an existing practice). Implementation of this recommendation can be assessed by reviewing the **additional MS making reference to EQF levels in qualification documents, supplements or registers** for all education sectors in their respective NQFs since 2017, **as well as mapping the more specific guidance developed** since 2017.

The 2013 evaluation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation shows that by the end of 2012, five countries had indicated EQF levels on Europass certificates / diplomas and their supplements (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France and Ireland)<sup>81</sup>. This number

<sup>79</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>80</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>81</sup> ICF GHK (2013). [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#).

increased in subsequent years, when newly issued qualifications made reference to the EQF level in a total of 15 EU and three non-EU countries (for more details, see Table 5 below). Of these, 13 MS (and two non-EU countries) had also included these levels in qualification databases and registers by 2017.

**Table 5. Overview of NQFs in which EQF levels are or are not mentioned on qualification documents / registers in 2017**

	In qualification documents / supplements of all qualifications		Qualifications registers / databases	
	EU-27	Non-EU	EU-27	Non-EU
<b>NQFs in which individual qualifications had a reference to EQF level by 2017</b>	CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK	CH, IS, MK, NO	CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FR, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI,	CH, MK
<b>NQFs in which individual qualifications did not make reference to EQF level by 2017</b>	AT, BE [nl, fr], BG, FI, CY, HR, NL, LU, PL, SE	LI, ME, TR, XK	AT, BE [nl], BE, [fr], BG, CY, FI, HR, HU, IE, IT, LU, SK, SE	IS, LI, ME, NO, TR, XK
<b>Referencing not complete by 2017</b>	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS	BE [de], ES, RO	AL, BA, RS
<b>Total completed</b>	15/29 <sup>82</sup>	4/11	13/29 <sup>83</sup>	2/11

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2017)<sup>84</sup>.

## Availability of information about the content of qualifications

Qualifications registers or databases (which are often made available through websites) can play a key role in making national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) operational, by providing detailed information about qualifications to learners, qualification holders, employers and others. The 2008 EQF Recommendation did not explicitly mention such registers, but by 2013, many countries were already using national registers, catalogues or databases to store information about qualifications, qualification standards, certificates, degrees, diplomas, titles and/or awards available in a country or region<sup>85</sup>. The EQF AG guidance note published in 2013 already underlined the importance of qualification databases in making information about qualifications available in a coherent way<sup>86</sup>. The 2017 EQF Recommendation formalised these existing practices by including a reference to registers in its legal text. Additional fine-tuning of these provisions is offered in the Recommendation's suggestion that information about qualifications and their learning outcomes is made accessible, and is published according to specific data fields, which are included in the Recommendation's Annex VI. For this reason, Table 1 classifies this provision as a fine-tuning of existing provisions. This provision is best understood against the backdrop of a 2017 mapping, which showed that information about the content of qualifications was difficult to find, and not always accessible to the public or available in electronic form<sup>87</sup>. In early 2017, existing registers did not always reflect the latest changes to NQFs, sometimes focusing on programmes rather than qualifications<sup>88</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>83</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

<sup>84</sup> Cedefop (2018). [National qualifications framework developments in European countries](#): analysis and overview 2015-16. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 65, p. 13.

<sup>85</sup> European Union (2013). [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>86</sup> European Union (2013). [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>87</sup> European Commission (2016). A new Skills Agenda for Europe: Annex III Revision of the EQF, [SWD\(2016\)\\_195 final](#), p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Cedefop, [National qualifications framework developments in European countries](#). Analysis and overview 2015-16, Luxembourg, Publications Office, Cedefop research paper; No 65, p. 53.

Progress in this direction can be measured by looking at the **qualification databases / registers in use, and the extent to which these contain the information suggested** in Annex VI. From the perspective of the end beneficiary, another step can be taken by looking at the **number of countries that have ensured a link between their qualification database or register and the Qualification Dataset Register (QDR)**. Databases can only be linked to the QDR if the information fields included in Annex VI are followed, so this serves as effective proxy for the number of countries that follow Annex VI. Only providing Annex VI data fields, without going on to link databases to those of other countries means that such registers are not as accessible to all as those of other countries. Such inter-linking and comparability are therefore considered the main point of comparison regarding progress on this point. **In 2017, a total of five countries** (Belgium [nl], Greece, Ireland, Latvia, and Slovenia) **had already linked national databases to the Learning Opportunities and Qualifications** portal, thereby publishing information about qualifications in their countries through a common European interface<sup>89</sup>.

### Availability of information about NQFs

The 2017 EQF Recommendation suggests that Member States make information about their respective NQF publicly available. This refers both to the referencing reports and to information about qualifications and their learning outcomes. The implementation of this recommendation can be measured by reviewing the **number of MS that have published their referencing report** since 2017. As the scope of information targeted for publication changed with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, Table 1 classifies this as a fine-tuning of existing provisions.

Referencing reports are published after deliberation and approval by the EQF AG. The 2013 evaluation highlighted that 11 out of the 16 national referencing reports that had so far been presented to the EQF AG were available online<sup>90</sup>. The referencing reports are also published on national websites, though these documents are not consistently available in each country's national language(s). No information is available on the number of reports that were available online in 2017; therefore, the 2013 figure is used for comparison. In principle, however, the total number of referencing reports available runs parallel to the ongoing referencing processes.

### Use of NQFs/EQF by various stakeholders

The 2017 EQF Recommendation suggests that Member States actively encourage the use of the EQF by various stakeholders to support the comparison of qualifications. This is a continuation of a similar provision in the 2008 EQF Recommendation, which specifically recommended that the NCP should encourage the participation of stakeholders (this provision is therefore classified as continuation in Table 1. The implementation of this recommendation can be assessed by **reviewing the targeted activities taken by MS to promote the EQF** among stakeholders since 2017, as well as the setting-up of new institutional settings/structures, if any, that promote cooperation between different stakeholders.

By 2013, NCPs already functioned as important providers of information about developments in their countries in relation to national and European qualifications<sup>91</sup>. These organisations disseminated relevant information about the EQF on their national websites. The 2013 evaluation concluded that despite such efforts, the visibility of the EQF was relatively low among potential end beneficiaries, such as the general public, employers/employees, trade unions, universities, students, schools or pupils<sup>92</sup>. The EQF

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<sup>89</sup> European Commission (2017). EQF Advisory Group note 41-3: Note for discussing the future implementation of the EQF Recommendation, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#), page 11.

<sup>91</sup> ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#), page 32.

<sup>92</sup> ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#), p 33.



AG itself underlined that this finding was still valid at the time the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted; at that point, no substantial developments in this area had been reported since the 2013 evaluation<sup>93</sup>. Therefore, the 2013 situation is used as a point of comparison.

### 2.3.5. Governance of the implementation of the EQF

The 2017 EQF Recommendation is explicit in its desire to continue using the structure already established in the 2008 EQF Recommendation. It calls for the continuation of the governance structure of **NCPs** as a valuable mechanism for monitoring progress, sharing experiences and helping to bring the EQF closer and become more visible to individuals and organisations. Individual EQF countries – and more specifically, their NCPs – are the primary actors working to reference their NQFs to the EQF, as well as to develop and follow a transparent methodology for doing so. The tasks of the NCPs also include providing information and guidance to stakeholders regarding this process, and engaging stakeholders in the comparison and use of qualifications at EU level. As its point of comparison, the study therefore takes the way in which the EQF AG was organised by 2017.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation also underlines the importance of keeping in place the existing structure of the **EQF AG**. Below, the structure of the AG as it existed by 2017 is described, which is used as point of comparison. The aim of the EQF AG is to ensure the consistent, coherent, transparent and coordinated implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, promoting trust and transparency in the process of referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the EQF. The EQF AG comprises the following types of stakeholders:

- representatives of EU Member States, and other EQF countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom<sup>94</sup>);
- the Council of Europe;
- European social partners, EU-level education and training stakeholders, representatives of civil society; and
- the European Commission, which serves as the secretariat for the AG and mobilises the relevant expertise of the key agencies involved with work on qualifications, i.e. Cedefop and the ETF.

The main form of implementation by the AG is through plenary AG meetings (three or four times a year), which focus on the exchange of best practices as well as peer learning. The suggested activities that serve as inputs for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation all build on existing governance structures put in place by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. The specific areas of action that flow from these provisions in the Recommendation are all reported in further detail under the thematic headings previously discussed in this report.

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<sup>93</sup> European Commission (2017), EQF Advisory Group note 41-3: Note for discussing the future implementation of the EQF Recommendation, page 7.

<sup>94</sup> Until the UK withdrew from the EU in February 2020.

### 3. How has the situation evolved during the evaluation period?

This chapter of the report presents developments in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation since its adoption by the Council. For each of the Recommendation's provisions, it reviews what was done and in what manner, both at EU level as well as at national level in the EQF countries. In line with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, such actions have all been implemented by the actors identified above in the section on governance. To avoid duplication, this chapter does not therefore contain a section on governance, but instead reports the activities implemented by the assigned actors by theme. For each theme, the relevant activities implemented in response to the 2017 EQF Recommendation are reported, starting with the follow-up conducted by EQF countries and their NCPs at national level, followed by work at the level of the EQF AG. The immediate outputs related to implementation are also presented in this chapter. The extent to which implementation has led to observable effects (results) is answered in detail in Chapter 4 of this report (subsection 4.1.1).

Table 6 below presents an overview of the key developments with regard to NQFs in relation to the various themes touched upon by the Recommendation. A ticked box (X) indicates that the NQF in that country has been subject to action in that direction; a green marked field indicates that such action took place after the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The last row presents the total number of NQFs in which such developments have been observed, with the effective number of NQF in which such developments had been observed since 2017 in brackets. Developments regarding the comparison of qualifications from non-EQF third countries and international qualifications have not achieved concrete results at the level of NQFs, and are therefore not included in the tables below (see subsections 3.1.4 and 3.2.2).

**Table 6. Overview of developments in NQF up to June 2022 (EU)**

	Referencing	Updating	Open to non-formal	QA in referencing	Credit systems VET link	Credit systems HE link	EQF levels on qualification documents	Information on NQF available	Qualification database links to QDR <sup>95</sup>
	<i>Codifying existing practice</i>	<i>Codifying existing practice</i>	<i>Codifying existing practice</i>	<i>Fine-tuning existing provisions</i>	<i>Codifying existing practice</i>	<i>Codifying existing practice</i>	<i>Continuation</i>	<i>Continuation</i>	<i>Fine-tuning existing provisions</i>
AT	X		X	X			X	X	
BE [de]									
BE [nl]	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
BE [fr]	X			X		X	X	X	X
BG	X			X	X	X	X		
CY	X			X			X	X	
CZ	X		X	X			X	X	X
DE	X			X			X	X	X
DK	X		X	X		X	X	X	
EE	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
EL	X			X			X	X	X
ES									
FI	X			X	X	X	X		
FR	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
HR	X			X	X	X	X	X	
HU	X			X			X	X	X
IE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
IT	X	X		X			X		
LT	X			X	X		X	X	X
LU	X			X	X	X	X		

<sup>95</sup> Providing links from qualification databases to QDR is not explicitly mentioned in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which instead only defined the Annex VI data fields. However, these data fields are the basis for making such links and are taken as a proxy. For the baseline, the study looked at functional links between qualification databases and the QDR's predecessor, the learning opportunities and qualifications (LOQ) portal.

	Referencing	Updating	Open to non-formal	QA in referencing	Credit systems VET link	Credit systems HE link	EQF levels on qualification documents	Information on NQF available	Qualification database links to QDR <sup>95</sup>
	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Fine-tuning existing provisions	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Continuation	Continuation	Fine-tuning existing provisions
LV	X	X		X		X	X	X	X
MT	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NL	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
PL	X		X	X			X	X	X
PT	X			X	X		X	X	X
RO	X			X			X	X	
SE	X		X	X			X	X	X
SI	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SK	X		X	X		X	X	X	
<b>Overall</b>	27/29 (1)	5/29 (5)	13/29 (5)	27/29 (0)	12/29 (2)	15/29 (1)	27/29 (12)	23/29 (10)	17/29 (12)

Fields marked in green, and numbers between brackets indicate changes in comparison to the situation in 2017

Note: Countries coloured in dark grey had not completed the referencing of their NQFs to the EQF.

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2020)<sup>96</sup>. Complemented by internal reporting from the EQF AG (note 59-2).

Table 7 below provides the same information as Table 6, but for NQFs in countries outside the EU.

**Table 7. Overview of developments in NQF up to June 2022 (non-EU)**

	Referencing	Updating	Open to Non-formal	QA in referencing	Credit systems VET	Credit systems HE	EQF levels on qualification documents	Information on NQF available	Qualification database links to QDR
	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Fine-tuning existing provisions	Codifying existing practice	Codifying existing practice	Continuation	Continuation	Fine-tuning existing provisions
AL	X			X					
BA									
CH	X			X			X	X	
IS	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
LI	X			X		X			
ME	X			X	X	X			
MK	X			X	X	X	X	X	
NO	X			X		X	X		X
RS	X			X				X	X
TR	X			X				X	X
XK	X		X	X	X	X			
<b>Overall</b>	10/11 (2)	0/11 (0)	1/11 (0)	10/11 (0)	4/11 (0)	6/11 (0)	4/11 (0)	5/11 (3)	4/11 (4)

Fields marked in green, and numbers in brackets indicate changes in comparison to the situation in 2017

Note: Countries coloured in dark grey had not completed the referencing of their NQFs to the EQF.

Source: compiled by the authors, based on a Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2020)<sup>97</sup>. Complemented by internal reporting from the EQF AG (note 59-2).

## 3.1. Strengthening the implementation of the EQF

### 3.1.1. Referencing

The main development since 2017 in relation to referencing has been the acceptance of referencing reports from Romania (2018), Serbia (2020) and Albania (2021). As of June 2022, the referencing reports for the German-speaking Community in Belgium and from Spain, as well as from Bosnia and Herzegovina, were still pending and had not yet been finalised. An analysis of bottlenecks hindering the referencing of these countries is provided in subsection 4.1.1.2. The EQF AG reviewed the relevant referencing reports and asked

<sup>96</sup> Cedefop (2021). [Overview of national qualifications framework developments in Europe 2020](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<sup>97</sup> Cedefop (2021). [Overview of national qualifications framework developments in Europe 2020](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office.

those countries for which reports are still pending to provide additional information on specific issues.

### 3.1.2. Updates

Since 2017, five current EQF countries (France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands) and all qualifications frameworks in the United Kingdom<sup>98</sup> reviewed and updated their referencing<sup>99</sup>, along with another four countries that plan to do so in the coming years (Belgium [nl], Croatia, Malta, Poland)<sup>100</sup>. The countries that conducted updates mostly did so to reflect new legislative and institutional realities in their countries, also taking into account findings from evaluations of national developments. These referencing updates were discussed by the EQF AG and followed a similar procedure to that of the initial referencing. In France, Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom, at least 10 years had passed since the initial referencing report; meanwhile, for Latvia and the Netherlands, six and seven years had passed, respectively.

**Table 8. Updated referencing reports submitted to the AG since 2017 (as of June 2022)**

Country	First referencing report	Date for updated referencing	Time passed	Reasons for update
<b>France</b>	2010	2021	11 years	Substantial number of legal and institutional changes since 2010; new levels in the qualifications framework; changes to school-based vocational training; new VET / apprenticeship law of 2018; new level included in general baccalaureate qualification
<b>Ireland</b>	2009	2020	11 years	Substantial legislative and institutional changes, including the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2012); Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, amended in 2019. The law enables a wider range of awarding organisations to access the NQF and clarifies the legal underpinning of the NQF. Evolving policy architecture of Ireland's approach to skills is highlighted.
<b>Italy</b>	2012	2022	10 years	The updated referencing report is not available on the Europass platform. The informal version used in the AG (not public) indicates that the update serves to account for the adoption of an NQF in Italy and the publication of national guidelines after the first referencing report.
<b>Latvia</b>	2012	2018	6 years	Includes the findings from a national review of the self-assessment report based on the new Vocational Education Law, the Law on Higher Education Institutions, and the outcomes of several pilot projects implemented between 2013 and 2015.
<b>The Netherlands</b>	2012	2019	7 years	Reporting on developments in the number of qualifications included in the NQF, as well as offering a synthesis of national evaluation findings and follow-up activities undertaken by the authorities. The report describes recent developments such as the ongoing preparation of a new law on the NQF.
<b>United Kingdom</b>	2009	2019	10 years	The updated referencing report is not available on the Europass platform. The version shared with the

<sup>98</sup> Separate reports for Scotland, Wales and England/Northern Ireland. Note that these totals are not included in the tables, as the UK withdrew from the EU in February 2020, and also left the EQF process.

<sup>99</sup> Instead of referring to an update to the EQF referencing, the UK and Irish reports used the term 're-referencing', to express the fact that the whole referencing process has been redone. In the context of this report, the term "updating" is used, as this is the term used in the EQF Recommendation.

<sup>100</sup> EQF AG 59-2, p. 2., complemented by Cedefop, which indicated that Malta is also preparing an update.

Country	First referencing report	Date for updated referencing	Time passed	Reasons for update
				AG (not public) indicates that the updated referencing was conducted to properly account for diverging education, training and qualifications arrangements between England and Northern Ireland, as well as Wales and Scotland, which is a consequence of the devolution of responsibilities for certain civil functions from the UK government to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to the governments in Wales and Scotland.

Source: based on the referencing reports available on the Europass portal and EQF AG minutes.

### 3.1.3. Supporting the consistent use of learning outcomes

Activities listed under this heading do not depend on the activities of EQF countries directly, but consist mainly of the involvement of the EQF AG as a whole, whereby the European Commission, Cedefop and the ETF have supported countries in the consistent use of learning outcomes. This support has continued in recent years.

In the AG, for instance, a project group was set up in 2018 to further develop the work on horizontal comparisons conducted between 2015 and 2017, with the aim of gaining more systematic insights into the way the principle of learning outcomes has been used to assign national qualifications to the NQF. A specific selection of qualifications in the fields of information and communication technology (ICT) and social care were compared between countries to review whether qualifications assigned to the same level were indeed comparable<sup>101</sup>. Similarly, the exercise reviewed seemingly comparable qualifications that were assigned to different levels, in order to better understand the reasons for this. In 2018, a peer-learning activity (PLA) was organised in Bratislava to discuss intended and achieved learning outcomes. In 2021, another project group was set up by the AG to develop and test guidelines on the consistent drafting of short descriptions for learning outcomes. Such short descriptions are relevant in particular for publication in databases/registers.

Since 2017, Cedefop has continued studies reviewing and comparing the application of learning outcomes in VET qualifications<sup>102</sup>. Empirical evidence highlights an increasing trend towards the use of learning outcomes for the description and definition of curricula, programmes and (VET) qualifications, initiated well before the 2017 EQF Recommendation and even predating the 2008 EQF Recommendation<sup>103</sup>. Prior to 2017, however, no consistent monitoring of the use and application of learning outcomes in other sectors of education (such as higher education or general education) is available. The use of learning outcomes to reference national qualifications levels to the EQF is another development that has been actively monitored by Cedefop. It reports on regular developments in NQFs, through its management of bi-annual reviews of NQF developments in EQF countries, which are published and regularly updated on Cedefop's NQF online tool<sup>104</sup>. In 2022, Cedefop published an update to its handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes, first published in 2016<sup>105</sup>. The ETF publishes similar overviews of relevant NQF

<sup>101</sup> EQF AG 46-4, Draft mandate for the Project Group on Horizontal Comparison of levelled qualifications in the context of the EQF AG Work Programme 2018-19

<sup>102</sup> Cedefop (2021). [Review and renewal of qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 82; Cedefop (2020). [Initial vocation education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office, Cedefop research paper, No 78; Cedefop (2018). [Analysis and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office, Cedefop research paper, No 66.

<sup>103</sup> See, for instance, European Council (2004). Education & Training 2010: The success of the Lisbon Strategy hinges on urgent reforms, OJ C 104, 30.4.2004, pp. 1–19. Also consider the attention paid to learning outcomes in the framework of the Bologna process, initiated in 1999, as well as the framework for qualifications in the EHEA, agreed during the 2005 Bergen Conference of European HE Ministers.

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/overview>

<sup>105</sup> Cedefop (2022). [Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes : a European handbook](#): Second Edition, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

developments in most EQF countries outside the EU, in co-production with Cedefop and UNESCO<sup>106</sup>.

### 3.1.4. Criteria/procedures for comparisons with qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries

Since 2017, work carried out on the criteria and procedures for comparing qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries has focused on the European level. No systematic information is available regarding follow-up actions at national level thus far. A recent mapping of such developments by Cedefop is expected to be available by the end of 2023 or early 2024, but was not available at the time of the study.

Activities in this area are undertaken by the EQF AG, and build on the extensive comparisons conducted as pilot projects prior to 2017. In 2018, a project group was established to continue work on comparisons with non-EQF third country qualifications frameworks<sup>107</sup>. This project group developed a concrete proposal for procedures, criteria and topics for non-EQF third country cooperation. Such work by definition requires that third countries' qualifications frameworks are in place and operational, and that there is policy relevance in such comparisons – for instance, due to (potential) migration flows. To put these into practice, the group sought to conduct comparison pilots with two non-EQF third country NQFs, as well as a regional qualifications framework. Ukraine, Cape Verde and the Southern African Development Community were selected<sup>108</sup>. The first comparisons based on these agreed procedures began in 2021 with Ukraine, with the support of the ETF and the relevant DGs in the European Commission. The EQF-Ukrainian QF report was published recently<sup>109</sup>. To support this comparative work, the ETF published a study in 2021 that maps regional qualifications framework initiatives around the world<sup>110</sup>.

In the context of the ongoing work on comparisons, it is also relevant to mention other EU-funded projects promoting the EQF, as these help to build cross-links between EQF and non-EQF third country frameworks. In this context, the ETF has provided conceptual work to facilitate comparisons with regional frameworks around the world, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) framework in Southern Africa; in Southeast Asia, with the qualifications reference framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries; and with the African Union, on the African Continental Qualifications Framework. In this last example, the ETF has offered support for the development of the framework, thus allowing similar design considerations to be taken into account, which could facilitate possible future comparisons. In early 2023, a PLA was being prepared by the ETF to discuss the results of the project group on non-EQF third country national and regional frameworks, with the intention of discussing developments and procedures that would enable the comparison of the EQF with frameworks in non-EQF third countries<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/qualifications>

<sup>107</sup> EQF AG note 48-3.

<sup>108</sup> EQF AG note 55-4.

<sup>109</sup> European Commission (2023). Comparison report of European Qualifications Framework and Ukrainian National Qualifications Framework published. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10513&furtherNews=yes#navItem-1>.

<sup>110</sup> European Training Foundation (2021). [Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020](#).

<sup>111</sup> EQF AG 54-1, p. 14.

## 3.2. Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning

### 3.2.1. Qualifications outside the formal domain

Cedefop's regular inventory of NQFs shows that since 2017 five additional countries have taken steps to broaden NQFs to include qualifications outside the formal domain (Austria, Belgium [nl], Czechia, Estonia, Ireland)<sup>112</sup>. These developments have been relatively modest, however, and are often limited to first exploratory pilot exercises. Countries use different terminology (e.g. non-formal qualifications, non-regulated qualifications, market qualifications), and there is currently a lack of a common understanding as to what constitute qualifications outside the formal education and training systems<sup>113</sup>. A specific PLA on the inclusion of qualifications outside the formal domain was organised in the autumn of 2018 in Vienna (Austria). This hosted a discussion on existing and planned procedures for including such qualifications into NQFs.

Within the EQF AG, continuous interactions on this topic have defined a work agenda that seeks to further map the procedures and approaches used with regard to new forms of qualifications – which may include qualifications outside of formal education and training – as well as to gain a better understanding of the different types of qualifications that are currently already included in NQF. An example of its work is the additional attention given to defining the role in the context of NQFs of micro-credentials, which may also be part of formal education. In particular, the adoption of the 2022 Council Recommendation on Micro-credentials increased interest in discussing this topic within the framework of the EQF AG<sup>114</sup>. Similarly, the legal basis for European Digital Credentials, created by article 4(6) of the 2018 Europass Decision, as well as their subsequent launch in 2021, inspired the EQF AG in May 2022 to discuss how the exchange of data on learning opportunities and qualifications could be positioned within the ongoing work on describing qualifications in a comparable and interoperable way<sup>115</sup>.

### 3.2.2. International qualifications

Since 2017, the EQF AG has conducted various activities to support the levelling of international qualifications through NQFs. An AG project group was established during 2018 and 2019 to continue the work of its predecessor in 2014. The purpose of this group was to begin the process of setting up voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications and information exchange between countries. As input for the design of these procedures, the group mapped out the existing procedures that apply to the inclusion of international qualifications into NQFs, and suggested the establishment of a voluntary structure for notification and information exchange at EQF level, covering such qualifications<sup>116</sup>. To follow up on these conclusions and further contribute to mutual exchanges and policy learning, a PLA event on international qualifications was planned. However, this was postponed due to COVID-19, eventually taking place at the end of 2022. In practice, this delay meant that by mid-2022, no concrete levelling procedures had been developed at EU level that can be used as voluntary blueprints for national procedures.

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<sup>112</sup> See Cedefop (2020). The countries mentioned in the text were informally validated by Cedefop against the preliminary draft outcomes of the 2022 inventory round.

<sup>113</sup> EQF AG note 58-4, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

<sup>115</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

<sup>116</sup> EQF AG (2019). Final report of the project group on the levelling of international qualifications and the information exchange between National Qualifications Frameworks or systems that have been referenced to the EQF. Note EQF AG 50-3.

Similarly, no formal system for information exchange and consultation between Member States regarding the levelling of international qualifications had been put in place, beyond the informal exchanges in AG project groups mentioned above.

### 3.3. Linking common principles (for quality assurance and credit systems) to qualifications with an EQF level

#### 3.3.1. References to quality assurance

All countries continue to have quality-assured qualifications in their NQFs, because quality assurance forms an integral part of the EQF referencing process, addressed by referencing criteria 5 and 6. Since the adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, no additional action has been reported at national level in relation to ensuring the quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level. Within the EQF AG, no specific discussions and activities have taken place around the implementation of quality assurance principles, and no specific supporting events have been organised since 2017. However, an increasing number of discussions shows the continuous relevance of qualification assurance, especially in the context of new forms of learning and new credential types. No systematic approach or evidence exists to track or review the extent to which the quality assurance principles of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (Annex IV) are applied in practice, which in principle provide broader orientation to countries.

#### 3.3.2. Linking of credit systems to the EQF/NQFs

When assessing developments since 2017, the nature of particular provisions should be considered. Provision MS4 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation on credit systems spells out the need to consider national contexts, leaving scope for Member States to choose to implement the recommendation if and where appropriate, with Annex V providing broad guidance on the principles with which credit systems should comply in order to build cohesion across national systems.

No substantial developments can be observed in the number of EQF countries that relate credit systems to NQFs since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, based on the 2020 Cedefop NQF inventories and relevant EQF referencing reports. However, two examples of countries that linked credit systems to their NQFs since 2017 were identified – in education sectors in the Netherlands (all qualifications) and Lithuania (VET qualifications)<sup>117</sup>. This increases the total number of NQFs in MS with such links to the credit systems of VET qualifications from 10 to 12 (plus the 4 NQFs outside the EU that already did so), and those with a link to HE qualifications from 14 to 15 (plus 6 NQFs outside the EU that already did so). Evidence from the 2022 NQF Inventory, which was not available at the time of the study, may point to additional examples. Within the context of the EQF AG, no particular discussions and activities took place on the subject of credit systems, and no specific supporting events have been organised since 2017.

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<sup>117</sup> Based on Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 reports for [the Netherlands](#) and [Lithuania](#).



## 3.4. Increasing the outreach of the EQF/NQFs to different stakeholders

### 3.4.1. Availability of information on EQF/NQF levels on qualifications

At European level, the Commission has offered **specific guidance to EQF countries** on the presentation of EQF levels on qualifications and in databases. For example, since 2017 it has organised thematic webinars to offer conceptual and technical information on the publication of qualifications in online databases.

Substantial follow-up can also be identified at national level in the making available of **information about the relevant EQF level on qualification documents**. Since 2017, the number of NQFs in which qualifications include an EQF level has increased from 15 NQF in the EU and three NQF outside the EU in 2017, to 27 NQF in the EU (incl. BE [nl] and BE [fr]) and eight NQF outside the EU (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Türkiye, Kosovo). This means that by June 2022, in the EU only Spain and the German-speaking Community of Belgium do not provide such information for qualifications. However, at the present time it is impossible for them to provide such information, given that neither country has yet referenced its NQF to the EQF. Outside the EU, certificates and diplomas do not yet include a reference to the EQF level in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Albania. Bosnia and Herzegovina still has its referencing report pending while Serbia and Albania concluded their referencing recently, in 2020 and 2021 respectively<sup>118</sup>, thus it is understandable that the EQF levels are not available on qualification documents yet.

Member States are also recommended to present a clear **reference to the EQF level of individual qualifications in online qualifications registers**. Such registers have become increasingly common since 2017 and offer NCPs a tool to present tailored information about individual qualifications (including their EQF level) as well as about the NQF as a whole (see subsection 3.4.2). Out of all referenced EQF countries, 23 NQFs from 22 EU countries and five non-EU countries had databases including qualifications with EQF levels by June 2022<sup>119</sup>. This represents an increase of 12 countries since 2017 (10 EU and three non-EU).

**Table 9. Overview of NQFs in which EQF levels are linked in qualification databases (June 2022)**

	EU-27	Non-EU
<b>EQF levels are mentioned on databases / registers – added between 2017 and June 2022</b>	AT, BE [nl], BE [fr], CY, HR, HU, IE, RO, SK, SE	IS, RS, TR
<b>EQF levels are mentioned on databases / registers – already by 2017</b>	CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, FR, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI	CH, MK
<b>No EQF levels are mentioned on databases / registers by June 2022</b>	BG, FI, IT, LU	AL, LI, ME, NO, XK
<b>Referencing not complete by June 2022</b>	BE [de], ES	BA
<b>Total completed</b>	23/29 <sup>120</sup> (10 since 2017)	5/11 (3 since 2017)

Source: compiled by the authors, based on EQF AG note on national developments (59-2).

<sup>118</sup> EQF AG- 59-2.

<sup>119</sup> EQF AG- 59-2.

<sup>120</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

### 3.4.2. Availability of information about the content of qualifications

As noted above, the use of qualification databases and registers has become increasingly common since 2017, with more detailed information on the latest developments to be provided in the 2022 Cedefop NQF Inventory.

The European Commission has also provided additional **support for the development of such databases** to help further expand the information infrastructure. This includes direct financial support for NCPs to establish such databases, and a PLA on the topic during March 2019 in Budapest.

The information provided in the contents of individual qualifications is further affected by **the revised Europass Decision from 2018**<sup>121</sup>. This was implemented via the launch of a common online platform in 2020, into which the content of the former Learning Opportunities and Qualifications Portal was integrated. The new platform presents **all relevant information** about Europass, the EQF and qualifications in an integrated way. Specifically in relation to the EQF, this platform allows a comparison of EQF levels between types of qualifications from different NQFs. The Europass portal aims to **serve as a repository for qualifications and learning opportunities** at European level. It uses the Qualification Dataset Register (QDR) as the interface for uploading/retrieving data on qualifications. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not explicitly call upon countries to ensure a link to the QDR, its Annex VI contains mandatory and optional information fields used for mapping national qualifications databases to the QDR, including the learning outcomes descriptions of individual qualifications. These information fields are used as the input for making a link to the QDR<sup>122</sup>. By June 2022, a total of 21 NQFs, including two Belgian NQFs had linked their qualifications databases including information on learning outcomes with the QDR on the Europass platform<sup>123</sup>.

**Table 10. NQFs in which the qualifications database is or is not connected to QDR / Europass (June 2022)**

	EU-27	Non-EU
National databases / registers connected to QDR / Europass by June 2022	BE [nl], BE [fr], CZ, DE, EE, EL, FR, HU, IE, LT, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI, SE	IS, NO, RS, TR
National databases / registers NOT connected to QDR / Europass by June 2022	AT, BG, CY, DK, FI, IT, HR, LU, RO, SK	AL, CH, LI, MK, ME, XK
Referencing not complete by June 2022	BE [de], ES	BA
Total completed	17/29 <sup>124</sup> (12 since 2017)	4/11 (4 since 2017)

Source: compiled by the authors, based on EQF AG note on national developments (59-2).

### 3.4.3. Availability of information about NQFs

Information about NQFs comes in two forms. First, the referencing report and its updates offer an in-depth review of the NQF and its referencing to the EQF. This is generally targeted towards an expert audience. Second, information about NQFs is made available and

<sup>121</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

<sup>122</sup> <https://europa.eu/europass/qdr/#/login>

<sup>123</sup> <https://europa.eu/europass/en/find-courses>

<sup>124</sup> Education in Belgium is a community competence. As a result, it works according to three qualifications frameworks, each with separate processes. The totals in the table count each of the separate NQFs, one for each of the three Belgian language communities.

accessible to a more general public through public information on websites managed by the EU and individual NCPs, as well as in qualifications registers and databases.

In line with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, **referencing reports** are generally published once the country's referencing process is complete. By mid-2022, the latest referencing reports for Bulgaria, Sweden, Türkiye and Kosovo were not publicly available, nor were the updated referencing reports for Italy or the United Kingdom. Older versions of the referencing reports for Türkiye and Kosovo were available, but these did not take into account requests for additional information and specific recommendations collected by the EQF AG<sup>125</sup>.

While public referencing reports are an important starting point for transparency, they have a largely technical focus and are not addressed towards the general public. Most developments since 2017 have aimed for a broader outreach beyond technical experts, and instead focus on **making information about NQFs available and accessible to a wider audience**. At national level, this is mostly done through the development of qualification databases (see subsection 3.4.2 above) and revisions to the NCP websites on which the EQF/NQFs are presented. Links to such national websites are provided on the Europass portal. At European level, Cedefop offers key information about developments in NQFs across Europe via its new NQF online tool, which allowing end beneficiaries to review developments or find specific information about countries individually, in comparison to other countries. In addition, the 'European Inventory of NQF' offers country-specific insights in detailed national documents that can be downloaded. The ETF also makes available detailed country fiches on non-EU EQF countries, and offers an online platform for exchanges on the theme of qualifications (OpenSpace)<sup>126</sup>.

#### 3.4.4. Use of NQF/EQF by different stakeholders

At national level, following the structure established prior to 2017, **NCPs are primarily responsible for disseminating information about the EQF** and encouraging its use, supported by the European Commission. Outreach towards stakeholders and experts is conducted through seminars and conferences as well as technically oriented handbooks and brochures, while the general public is targeted through NQF websites – including the qualifications databases and registers mentioned previously – as well as a mix of social media channels<sup>127</sup>. Because the focus of communication has remained primarily technical in nature, communication efforts with regard to NQFs have predominantly aimed to inform and make sure that the relevant information can be found. Existing efforts are less suitable for encouraging the use of NQFs by the non-technical public, such as qualification holders, employers and other relevant stakeholders.

At European level, the **European Commission** has played an active role in supporting communication efforts, especially since 2020 within the framework of the Europass platform, where information about the EQF and NQF is published and regularly updated. Specific information is also offered on the websites of **Cedefop and the ETF**<sup>128</sup>. Moreover, to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EQF in 2018, a European conference was organised, bringing together various stakeholders to reflect on the EQF's achievements, current challenges, and the road ahead<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>125</sup> These reports are available on Europass ([here](#)), but the EQF AG notes make reference to subsequent rounds of comments and revisions.

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/qualifications>

<sup>127</sup> Cedefop (2020). [National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019](#). Qualifications frameworks: transparency and added value for end users. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<sup>128</sup> Cedefop. National Qualifications frameworks (NQFs) online tool. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool>, ETF (n.d.). Qualifications. <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/practice-areas/qualifications>

<sup>129</sup> See for instance the conference website, hosted by the [European Commission](#).

Since 2017, the **EQF AG** has prioritised outreach. This is visible, for instance, in its work to support the development of databases and registers (see the previous section). Moreover, a PLA on communication was planned to explore different national practices aimed at effectively reaching out to and communicating with different stakeholders and end beneficiaries on the benefits of using the EQF and the NQFs, in order to further encourage their use. After being delayed during COVID-19 lockdowns, the PLA was eventually held in the Netherlands in November 2022. It focused on questions such as how to show the benefits of the EQF and the NQFs, and how to reach out to different stakeholders and end beneficiaries of the EQF/NQFs.

### 3.5. European developments in the broader field of education and training

The 2017 EQF Recommendation is based on and linked to a broader body of policy initiatives at EU level. This section of the report briefly reviews the main policy documents and legislative instruments since 2017 that have had some impact on the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

- The **European Pillar of Social Rights** (2017) is aimed at developing a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its subsequent Action Plan was issued in March 2021<sup>130</sup>. This specifies an individual's right of access to quality education across their lifespan, as stated in Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights: 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.'
- In 2017, at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, European leaders endorsed the idea of creating a **European Education Area (EEA) by 2025**. This is intended to help achieve three objectives: to promote cross-border mobility and cooperation in education and training; to help overcome unjustified obstacles that make it more difficult to learn, train or work in another country, with the aim of realising the 'free movement of learners' and creating a genuine European learning space; and lastly, to support Member States in improving the inclusive, lifelong-learning based and innovation-driven nature of their education and training systems<sup>131</sup>. Following examples of specific policy instruments have been identified, developed and/or revised in support of the creation of a European Education Area:
  - the Council **Recommendation on Automatic Recognition**<sup>132</sup> (2018). This aims to ensure that every student, apprentice or pupil in the EU who has undertaken periods of study abroad can have that experience automatically recognised, in combination with higher education or school leaving certificates, for the purposes of further study. The Recommendation promotes the further use of existing tools that can support the recognition of qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, and states EQF referencing as a condition to achieve automatic mutual recognition. In addition, other tools such as Europass, the European Credit Transfer and

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<sup>130</sup>European Commission (n.d.). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

<sup>131</sup> European Commission (2018). Communication from the Commission: Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies, COM/2018/268 final: p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, [OJ C 444](#), 10.12.2018, pp. 1–8.

Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, are also suggested.

- The Council **Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning**<sup>133</sup> (2018) identifies eight key competences required for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion (namely, literacy; multilingualism; numerical, scientific and engineering skills; digital and technology-based competences; interpersonal skills, and the ability to adopt new competences; active citizenship; entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression). The validation of such competences is key, for which the EQF has been suggested as a relevant reference framework.
- **European Skills Agenda** for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, published on 1 July 2020, as well as its predecessor, the New Skills Agenda (2016). The 2020 European Skills Agenda groups together 12 actions for the European Commission; renews previous policy commitments; builds bridges between EU policymaking in the fields of skills, higher education and research and development (R&D), continuing vocational training and adult learning; as well as European transparency tools. More specifically, it defined the legislative agenda for work on Europass, micro-credentials and individual learning accounts.
  - The Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (**VET Recommendation**<sup>134</sup>), as well as its legal predecessors on quality (EQAVET) and credit systems (ECVET). The Recommendation suggests that Member States make best use of European transparency tools such as the EQF when considering the implementation of its provisions.
  - On 16 June 2022, the Council adopted the **Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability**<sup>135</sup>, with the aim of ensuring that micro-credentials are of high quality and are issued in a transparent way, to build trust in what they certify. Such micro-credentials are generally not recognised as standalone qualifications but have value in their own right as a certificate or recognition of achievement of learning outcomes in a certain area.
  - On 16 June 2022, the Council adopted the **Recommendation on individual learning accounts**<sup>136</sup> to ensure that everyone has access to relevant training opportunities that are tailored to their needs, throughout life and independently of whether they are currently employed or not. It seeks to contribute to increasing participation in lifelong learning. The EQF can play a role as the blueprint for setting up public registries of training or validation opportunities.
- Work on the **European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications** (ESCO) began in 2013, with its first full version being published in 2017. ESCO's aim is to support job mobility across Europe and therefore a more integrated and efficient labour market, by offering a "common language" on occupations and skills that can be used by different stakeholders in the areas of employment and in education and training. It functions like a dictionary, in the sense that it allows competences to be identified and described and in different languages

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<sup>133</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning, [OJ C 189](#), 4.6.2018, pp. 1-13.

<sup>134</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, pp. 1–16.

<sup>135</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

<sup>136</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 26-34.

according to a common reference terminology. Having a common language regarding the skills looked for by labour market actors also helps in informing and defining the learning outcomes for qualifications. This link is made explicit in the latest version of ESCO, in which ESCO skills can be explicitly linked to the learning outcomes of qualifications.

- The **Europass Decision of 2018**<sup>137</sup>, which includes a revised common framework for the provision of services for skills and qualifications (2018), sets out the goal of Europass to support individuals in the management of their careers through intuitive, modern tools that reflect people's needs in the context of today's labour market, as well as in education and training systems. The Europass platform, launched on 1 July 2020, represents a major phase of implementation of the Europass Decision, and serves as the official platform for the EQF.
  - In October 2021, the European Commission launched **European Digital Credentials for Learning**<sup>138</sup>. This service allows end beneficiaries to receive and store secure and verifiable proof of their learning outcomes and achievements. This is the implementation of the authentication services for digital documents or representations of information on skills and qualifications, as outlined in Europass Decision Article 4(6). Such credentials provide proof of learning achievements in terms of activities, assessments, achievements, professional entitlements or qualifications.
  - Work on digital credentials can be positioned within the broader framework of the **European Learning Model (ELM)**. The ELM aims to help the recognition of qualifications and digital credentials across Europe, by providing a unified way to refer to and describe all things related to learning, such as learning opportunities, credentials, employer recommendations, identification, and the licensing of education institutions and / or their programmes.
- The **Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027**, part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The implementation of the EQF as a transparency tool can contribute to a better understanding of foreign qualifications within the Union, which is key for the labour market integration of migrants and refugees.

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<sup>137</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112 OJ L 112 OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

<sup>138</sup> See, for example, European Commission (n.d.). [What are digital credentials?](#)

## 4. Findings

This chapter of the report provides answers to the research questions relating to the five evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, and relevance). A full list of the research questions and the chapters of the report in which they are covered is provided in Annex 12.

The analysis of the five evaluation criteria presented in this section is based on data triangulation, including the findings provided in Sections 2 and 3 unless otherwise mentioned, and evidence gathered through the study's various research activities (i.e. the survey, mapping, case studies, the PC and the validation workshop).

### 4.1. To what extent was the intervention successful, and why?

#### 4.1.1. Effectiveness

This chapter focuses on answering the evaluation questions relating to effectiveness. The first part of the chapter presents the 2017 EQF Recommendation's contribution to achieving its objectives. The second and third parts focus on the progress made in implementing the provisions 1-17 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

##### 4.1.1.1. Contribution to achieving its specific and wider objectives

The present study finds that, overall, the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation: (i) contributed to progress towards **improvements in the transparency and comparability of qualifications (Specific Objective 1), by engaging key stakeholders, working together and facilitating comparisons;** and (ii) **to some extent, helped to facilitate lifelong learning (Specific Objective 2) by inspiring, for example, a widening of the scope of NQFs in certain contexts,** even if this did not lead to observable effects on participation in lifelong learning. While this suggests that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to a considerable extent towards its specific objectives, this finding needs to be positioned within a historic perspective. **These achievements cannot be viewed in isolation from the 2008 EQF Recommendation,** as the main purpose, scope and activities of the 2017 EQF Recommendation remain largely the same as those of the 2008 EQF Recommendation (see Chapters 2 and 3). Thus, the 2017 Recommendation managed to effectively *continue* the journey of improving the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications in Europe and facilitating lifelong learning, as initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation.

With regard to **wider objectives,** the present study finds that the **impacts of the 2017 Recommendation on the modernisation of education and training systems (Wider Objective 1) are small.** Where visible, such impacts can be found mainly in the **reflections it encouraged concerning modernisation of education systems, rather than in contributions to modernisation itself.** Evidence that the 2017 EQF Recommendation triggered new developments or original reforms remains weak and is confined to a few countries only. Especially among NQFs that are already mature, the 2017 EQF Recommendation **has not been responsible for driving lifelong learning or modernisation policies.** In relation to **employability, mobility and the social integration of learners and workers (Wider Objective 2), no direct impacts were expected nor found.** Where improvements are observed in employability, mobility and social integration, these are the result of national reforms and other external developments that are not directly linked to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

## Specific Objective 1: improved transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications

Improving the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe is one of the key functions of the EQF, and this therefore features as a specific objective of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This section reviews the manner in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation has attempted to deliver such improvements and assesses to what extent such improvements can be observed. For this purpose, the present study has identified specifically what has changed under the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation with regard to: the transparency and comparability of qualifications at national level (i.e. within countries); the transparency and comparability of qualifications at European and international levels (i.e. between countries); and subsequently, what can be concluded about the overall contribution of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications.

This study has identified a number of ways in which the EQF has **enhanced the transparency and comparability of qualifications from different education and training systems within EQF countries**. This has mainly been achieved through **support for national NQF developments, the use of learning outcomes, and critical reflections on the national system**. Indeed, the case studies conducted for the present study highlight national reforms linked to the development of NQFs. According to stakeholders consulted in Ireland (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) and France (mainly authorities working with qualifications), national reforms improved the understanding of qualification pathways and of the relationship between qualifications from different educational sectors, leading to increased transparency and comparability overall (see Box 1). Any NQF developed in response to the 2008 or 2017 EQF Recommendations can be expected to have similar impacts in the longer term. In addition, the publication of various comparative studies on the use of learning outcomes (mentioned in subsection 3.1.3) further highlights the increased take-up and application of the learning outcomes approach, which allows the better comparability of qualifications. The introduction of the learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the 2008 EQF Recommendation, and is underlined by its update in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Lastly, in the survey and interviews carried out for the present study, EQF AG members indicated that the work on (updating) referencing reports helped them to better understand the education systems in other countries, which in turn helped to bring to light national particularities or limitations, feeding reflections that could potentially lead to their improvement.

### **Box 1. Case study examples concerning the visibility of transparency, comparability and trust in more mature NQFs**

**Ireland:** the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is widely perceived to have had – and is still having – a major influence on the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications in the country. Ireland’s NFQ was launched in 2001, and thus predates the European development of the EQF. It is, however, a good example of how the establishment of a national qualifications framework can inspire further reforms. In 2017, for instance, stakeholders who were surveyed agreed to a large extent that the NFQ had made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand; that the NFQ had made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other; and that qualifications included in the NFQ were highly trusted, both nationally and internationally<sup>139</sup>. Furthermore, in 2017, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) noted that since 2003, the NFQ had ‘become embedded in how we think and speak about qualifications in Ireland’<sup>140</sup>. This level of trust has only increased over recent years, as indicated by all of the national stakeholders interviewed (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training provider). With regard to trust and understanding between education and training sectors, the NFQ/EQF

<sup>139</sup> Indecon (2017). Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. [https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ\\_Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ_Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>140</sup> Foreword by QQI in Coles, M. (2017) National Qualifications Frameworks. Reflections and Trajectories. Dublin: QQI.



support dialogue between the further education and training (FET) and HE sectors. The current FET strategy and the latest National Access Plan<sup>141</sup>, aimed at establishing equality of access to HE, led to QQI commissioning a study to determine whether there is a significant difference between the learning associated with the FET Advanced Certificate programme cycle, and the HE Higher Certificate programme, as implemented at Level 6 on the NFQ (Level 5 EQF). This reveals the way in which the EQF can influence debates, but also indicates its limitations in resolving them.

**France:** following its revision in 2018, the French qualifications framework now includes vocational qualification certificates – *certificats de qualification professionnelle*, (CQPs) – issued by organisations jointly run by social partners. Previously, these did not feature any level because their scope was considered to be too narrow. Since the revision, they can now be referenced to a specific level in the National Register of Vocational and Professional Qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles*, RNCP), thus increasing the transparency and comparability of these types of qualifications. In addition, the revision formalised the division of qualifications into “*blocs de compétence*”, which can be validated separately and accumulated over time. While these had already been introduced in 2014, it was only in 2018/2019 that a clear definition of competence blocks was included in law, extending the obligation to define competence blocks for all types of qualifications registered. Following the completion of the revision, these can now be referenced to a specific level in the RNCP. As such, this has contributed directly to the portability of smaller units of qualification, and therefore of the system as a whole.

While the evidence shows that **the EQF is widely used for transparency and comparability of formal qualifications between countries, such use appears to be limited in the case of qualifications outside the formal domain, and when discussing portability**. More specifically, the results of the survey carried out for the present study show that, over the last five years, the EQF helped respondents to better understand another country’s qualifications system. A total of 130 out of 229 (57 %) of PC respondents (mostly someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) reported that it was likely or very likely for qualifications from formal education to be recognised by education and training providers and employers in other EQF countries<sup>142</sup>. Different groups of PC respondents<sup>143</sup> also yielded anecdotal examples of how the EQF had facilitated comparisons by offering a better understanding of the entry requirements for programmes.<sup>144</sup> Conversely, when asked about the portability of qualifications outside the formal domain, 59 % (85 of 145) of citizens and national and local authorities consulted in the PC indicated that it was unlikely or very unlikely that non-formal qualifications would be recognised in other EQF countries. In the end, the actual portability of qualifications across borders depends extensively on national rules and requirements that go beyond EQF levels and learning outcomes.

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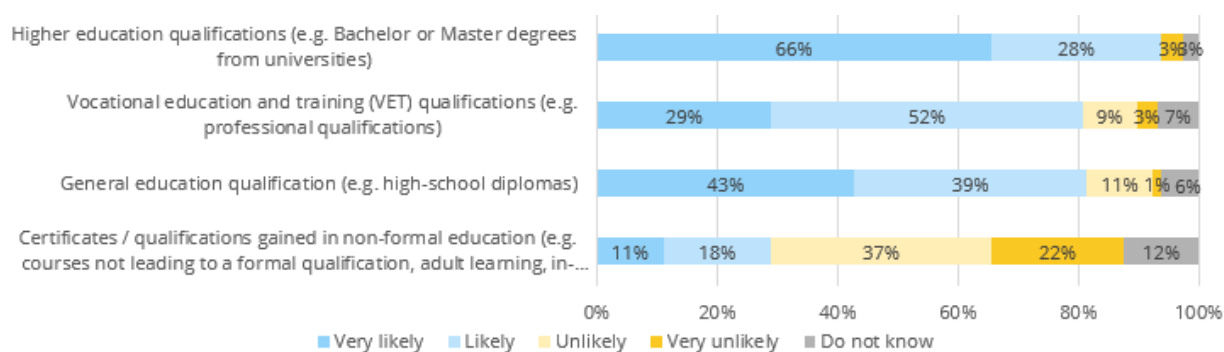
<sup>141</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/>

<sup>142</sup> These results are presented in more detail in the case study analysis annexed to this evaluation report.

<sup>143</sup> Consulted stakeholders include holders of qualification(s), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/ consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients.

<sup>144</sup> These results are presented in greater detail in the case study analysis annexed to this evaluation report.

**Figure 1. In your opinion, how likely is it for qualifications obtained in your country to be recognised by education and training providers in other EQF countries?**



Note: Total (N)=145. Question was answered by citizens, local and national organisations.  
 Source: authors' own elaboration, based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023.

In addition to the EQF being a tool to increase transparency and comparability, evidence shows that the **methodological work within the EQF framework has had a good impact at system level – for instance, enabling horizontal comparisons, expanding the use of learning outcomes, and increasing understanding of other systems.**

This can be seen in the **increasing number of studies published that are able to compare qualifications from different countries** (see subsection 3.1.3). Doing so depends on the use of learning outcomes, similar approaches to NQF, and ongoing cooperation in the field of qualifications – all of which were initiated in 2008, and are facilitated by the 2017 EQF Recommendation. During the study period, EQF work on horizontal comparisons supported such comparisons because it aimed to ensure consistency in levelling and to build further trust<sup>145</sup>, while also exploring the practical application of comparisons (e.g. the Cedefop 'Comparing Qualifications' project described 'use cases' for comparative methodologies and analysis<sup>146</sup>).

Furthermore, **the EQF AG's discussion of learning outcomes also progressed during the evaluation period**, widening from a focus on referencing criteria and learning outcome approaches in 2017-2018, to broader practical application linked to transparency, micro-credentials, international qualifications and validation. Looking at the broader work strands of the EQF AG, 30 out of 58 (52 %) of EQF AG participants stated that being involved in the EQF AG had substantially increased their understanding of other qualifications systems, while another 15 (26 %) stated that it improved their understanding somewhat.

**While stakeholders tend to see the 2017 EQF Recommendation as having a beneficial impact on the transparency and comparability of qualifications between countries, the extent of this impact appears stronger in national contexts that have undergone a recent NQF reform.** Indeed, a large majority of all stakeholders consulted, without significant differences between stakeholder type, agreed that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation had improved the comparability, transparency and understanding of qualifications from other countries (101 out of 121 or 83 % of survey respondents, and 195 out of 229 or 85 % of PC respondents). However, the country-level assessments in the case studies provide a slightly more nuanced picture, with differences

<sup>145</sup> See EQF AG note AG 47-3 (2018)

<sup>146</sup> Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series, No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766>, Chapter 3. Purpose 1: Supporting quality, relevance and excellence of VET qualifications (use case: improving the content and structure of VET qualifications; use case: Improving the relevance of VET qualifications). Purpose 2: Supporting the transferability of learning outcomes and flexible learning pathways in the national and international context (use case: supporting the levelling of VET qualifications; use case: supporting mobility in VET; use case: exploring opportunities for flexible learning pathways; use case: applying for a job in another country with a VET qualification). Purpose 3: Supporting the development of European vocational core profiles (use case: supporting the development of European vocational core profiles).

between countries. In Germany and Ireland, only limited impacts were perceived, while in Spain and France, the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations were seen as key reference points in improving comparability and transparency, and in building trust (see Box 2). One possible explanation for this could relate to whether a reform or revision of the qualifications framework took place in a given country between 2017 and 2022. Where this is not the case, it is understandable that the 2017 EQF Recommendation is less visible or at the forefront of stakeholders' minds.

#### **Box 2. Examples of impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in various countries**

**No/limited impact:** because **Germany** began the development of an NQF early (in 2006), the interviewed public authorities and authorities working with qualifications did not regard the 2017 EQF Recommendation as having had a substantial impact on the further development of its qualifications system. All follow-up and policy considerations in the years 2017-2022 have been relatively limited, and were not as profound as those prior to 2017.

**No/limited impact:** a similar situation was noted in **Ireland**, whose NFQ was launched in 2003) and learning outcomes predate the EQF. The consensus among those national stakeholders interviewed (mostly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) is that Ireland has not been reliant on the EQF to drive developments (e.g. the original referencing did not lead to changes, and the levels have been stable over time).

**Visible impact:** conversely, in **Spain**, where the Spanish Qualifications Framework (MECU) was adopted in 2022 (but note: referencing has not yet been concluded; see subsection 3.1.1), the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation has provided a crucial impetus for the development of the Spanish Framework, as indicated by the national stakeholders interviewed (mostly authorities working with qualifications). Along with the developments surrounding the referencing and design of the Spanish NQF, work was also undertaken to facilitate the integration of the Spanish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (MECES), which has existed since 2011, into MECU. The 2017 EQF Recommendation's provision on including all qualifications into the NQF can be seen as an important factor in the aim of bringing together different sub-sectors in Spain.

**Visible impact:** in **France**, debates concerning level descriptors (as documented in various drafts and proposals published before the adoption of the Law of 5 September 2018 on the "freedom to choose one's professional future") reveal the direct influence of the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations on the reform process and on the French qualifications framework. In particular, contrary to the original plans, it was decided to introduce a separate category entitled "Knowledge" – at first, consulted public authorities and authorities working with qualifications argued that knowledge was intrinsically linked to know-how and could not be separated without losing the holistic understanding of "competence" prevailing in the French VET system. Comparability across Europe and transparency were key arguments leading to the adoption of descriptors closely aligned with the EQF<sup>147</sup>.

The findings above show how the 2017 EQF Recommendation has continued the journey of improving transparency, comparability and portability, as initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. This section of the report shows that stakeholders (without significant differences between stakeholder types) are largely optimistic about the Recommendation's effectiveness in terms of the transparency and comparability of qualifications, both within and across countries, especially with regard to formal qualifications. However, this cannot be separated from pre-2017 developments or from national reforms that have helped to modernise education and training. Other improvements were reported to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications, to which EQF developments had contributed, even if it was not the sole reason. Such developments include the continuation of work on horizontal comparisons, learning outcomes and studies.

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<sup>147</sup> Sgarzi, M. (2020). French exceptionalism tested against the Lisbon strategy principles. The case of the Qualifications Framework implementation process. In: bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschafts-pädagogik – online, issue 39, 1-16. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi_bwpat39.pdf)

## Specific Objective 2: facilitating lifelong learning

To assess to what extent, and in what manner, the 2017 EQF Recommendation facilitated lifelong learning, the present study looked into rates of participation in adult learning, and considered how the EQF has improved lifelong learning conditions from two perspectives. First, this section reviews the potential of NQFs to facilitate lifelong learning by reducing barriers to (new types of) qualifications, either by formally including these into the NQF, or by linking to validation procedures. Second, it reviews how national policy reforms, such as the establishment or revision of the NQF, facilitate lifelong learning.

**Participation rates in adult learning** allow to measure quantitatively the extent to which lifelong learning has improved in the evaluation period. Naturally, **this indicator is influenced by a large number of developments beyond the scope of the 2017 EQF Recommendation**. Even so, it can offer an insight into the broader context. With no visible improvements at EU level between 2017 (10.4 %) and 2022 (11.9 %) <sup>148</sup>, it can be concluded that more needs to be done in order to effectively facilitate lifelong learning. EU objectives on this indicator set for 2010 (12.5 % of adults learning in the last four weeks) and 2020 (15 % of adults learning in the last four weeks) were not met. At the same time, during the Porto Social Summit, a new target was agreed of at least 60 % of adults attending training courses each year by 2030, further highlighting the importance of the topic <sup>149</sup>.

**Progress towards including all types of qualifications in NQFs was limited between 2017 and 2022**. Since 2017, five additional countries have included non-formal qualifications in their frameworks. This means that by June 2022, 16 EU and 10 non-EU NQFs still only include formal qualifications. Validation arrangements were already in place in the majority of countries prior to 2017 <sup>150</sup>. These offer an alternative (although sometimes more demanding) means to have one's competences recognised (see also subsection 4.1.1.2).

**Stakeholder consultations, especially among stakeholders involved in the EQF process, show overall agreement with the importance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to improving conditions for lifelong learning, but the extent of this is likely to be higher in countries with less mature NQFs and with recent NQF reforms**. While 70 % of the survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) (81 out of 116) agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation supported flexible learning and contributed to improving conditions for lifelong learning, this view was echoed by only 53 % of PC respondents (123 out of 229), mostly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holder of qualifications. Consultations conducted in the case studies with a wider group of national stakeholders showed that lifelong learning developments in some countries are associated with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, while in other countries this is not the case. This depends on the extent to which the NQF and the broader qualification environment had already been adjusted to the aims of the EQF following the 2008 EQF Recommendation. For instance, in Serbia, reform of the country's NQF has been used to make an explicit link to larger reform agendas on lifelong learning (see Box 3 below), while in Poland, such developments had been initiated before 2017, and have since consisted of fine-tuning reforms that had already been set in motion (see Box 3).

**Box 3. Examples of how NQFs are used to support larger reform agendas on lifelong learning**

<sup>148</sup> Eurostat (2022), Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and age (TRNG\_LFS\_01); [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG\\_LFS\\_01\\_custom\\_4586100/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFS_01_custom_4586100/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>149</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, COM(2021)\_102 final.

<sup>150</sup> European Commission (2020), [Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office. The study presents a comprehensive overview of the biennial European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning updates in 2016 and 2018.

**Poland:** the 2016 implementation of NQF and Integrated Qualifications System (IQS) in Poland provided an opportunity to include market qualifications (which could be referred to as non-formal) into the IQS and to level them. This means that they are integrated into a single system, alongside qualifications from formal education and statutory qualifications. Although the 2017 EQF Recommendation largely maintained the policy direction and most relevant actions that had been initiated under the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation should be seen as “maintaining” and/or “fine-tuning” lifelong learning and development of the qualifications system development in Poland.

**Serbia:** the 2018 National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS) Law in Serbia allows the inclusion of qualifications gained outside of formal systems into the country’s NQF. While preparations for the law and the design of the NQF predate the 2017 EQF Recommendation, its design was influenced by the same European-level discussions that also framed the contents of the 2017 EQF Recommendation<sup>151</sup>. Education and training providers as well as end beneficiary representatives **interviewed in the case study confirmed that regardless of the precise causal chain** in relation to the 2017 Recommendation, the ability to develop NQFS from scratch, helped to explicitly facilitate lifelong learning by linking non-formal and informal learning to the NQF, in addition to support for the validation of learning outcomes from various settings. The NQFS remains in the early stage of implementation; activities are ongoing, and are being implemented in a significant number of different areas. Impact has therefore mainly been seen in terms of policy development and not (yet) in terms of increased participation in lifelong learning.

In those case studies countries with more mature NQFs, reformed frameworks have been in place considerably longer, thus reducing the potential for the 2017 EQF Recommendation to have a direct impact on lifelong learning. This is the case in France, the Netherlands, Ireland, and to some extent in Czechia. In these case study countries, consulted stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) do not specifically perceive the 2017 EQF Recommendation as having impacted lifelong learning policies, but as moving in the same direction as national reforms that aim to stimulate lifelong learning, as illustrated in the Netherlands and France (see Box 4).

#### Box 4. The use of NQFs in national reforms as facilitating tools for lifelong learning

**France:** reform of France’s personal training account scheme (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) was begun in 2015, and was revised in 2019. This reform created a strong incentive for training providers to develop new qualifications and to register them, as this made them eligible for funding. As such, the CPF strengthened the use, application and prominence of the French NQF as an instrument related to lifelong learning.

**The Netherlands:** the Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) is included in a national regulation on an individual learning budget (launched in 2022)<sup>152</sup>, and lifelong learning has become a priority in the Netherlands. This is clearly expressed in the regular Parliamentary Letters on Lifelong Development (which first appeared in 2018); experimental pilots relating to the flexibilisation of (formal) qualifications; part-time studies; and subsidy programmes to stimulate the lifelong development of individuals (STAP-budget) and companies (e.g. for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), the SLIM-arrangement<sup>153</sup>). In relation to this increased attention to lifelong development, stakeholders working with the NCP in the Netherlands perceive that the relevance and interest has increased in the NLQF, as a framework that can make education and training offers more transparent and which provides a clearer indication of what level of learning outcomes people have obtained.

<sup>151</sup> See for instance the 2012 Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020, Official Gazette RS, No 107/2012 of 9 November 2012.

<sup>152</sup> STAP-budget (Dutch acronym for *Stimulerend Arbeidsmarktpositie*, or Incentive Labour market Position): <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiele-regelingen/stap-budget> [accessed 30-09-2022] Qualifications included in the NLQF are eligible for learners that make use of the individual learning budget offered through this regulation.

<sup>153</sup> SLIM-regeling (Subsidy for learning and development in SMEs): <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiele-regelingen/slim-regeling> [accessed 30-09-2022]

The evidence presented above suggests that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has made some beneficial contributions to facilitating lifelong learning, although more remains to be done. The impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be observed not in terms of improving adult learning participation rates, but indirectly by removing existing barriers to lifelong learning and – in some cases – contributing to national lifelong learning reforms. While some additional countries opened up their NQFs to qualifications offered outside of formal education and training systems, this is not yet common practice for all NQFs. The impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in countries with more mature NQFs was also more limited. However, the cases discussed above exemplify the potential for the reform of NQFs to improve lifelong learning conditions, especially when embedded in or linked to wider lifelong learning policies.

## **Wider Objective 1: modernising education and training systems**

To assess to what extent, and in what manner, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has contributed to achieving the wider objective of modernising education and training systems, the study looked at both reforms immediately linked to the introduction and operation of NQFs, and at reforms of the education and training system that directly imply the existence and use of the EQF/NQFs. The present study also specifically examined the role of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in such reforms.

**The country analysis shows that the approach of the EQF has supported and inspired reforms of qualifications systems with differing levels of maturity, in particular in connection with the use of learning outcomes. This, in turn, has inspired the modularisation of qualifications and the validation of competences.** More specifically, this type of reform can be seen especially in countries that have recently adopted or revised and referenced their NQFs, such as Finland (2017), France (2021) and Serbia (2018). Interestingly, however, Germany also carried out important reforms of its qualifications system, despite having adopted the German NQF, the *Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen* (DQR) in 2012, showing a long-lasting impact of NQFs on reform activities. Examples show that learning outcomes approaches have been extended to all sub-sectors of the education and training sector since 2017 (e.g. in Finland and Serbia); that modularisation is progressing, closely linked with the introduction or reform of mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the introduction of greater flexibility through partial validation (e.g. in Germany, France and Serbia). Furthermore, qualifications frameworks have been opened up to integrate new types of qualifications (e.g. in Germany, creation of Professional Bachelor's and Master's Degrees at levels 6 and 7 in 2020) or qualifications that were not previously levelled – e.g. the *Baccalauréat Général* and the vocational qualification certificates (CQPs) issued by organisations jointly run by the social partners in France. Such reforms are part of a broader trend towards bringing different sub-sectors of the education and training system closer together, with the aim of facilitating mobility and progression.

**Reforms of the education and training systems conducted since 2017 are generally well aligned with the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and the overall ambitions of the EQF/NQFs.** Reforms closely linked to NQFs, including the adoption or revision of NQFs and the implementation of related mechanisms (e.g. validation, quality assurance, learning outcomes) have mainly been triggered by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. **However, the 2017 EQF Recommendation is said by national stakeholders interviewed** (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) **in four out of five specific case study countries (Germany, Finland, France, Serbia) to have informed the debates** to some extent. In addition, a large majority of PC respondents regardless of country group (189 out of 229, or 83 %) agreed or strongly agreed that European cooperation within the framework of the EQF was one of the factors that has inspired education and training reforms in their country. In the survey, 86 out of 122 respondents (70 %), mostly consisting of public authorities, were aware of policy developments in

response to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. End beneficiaries were less aware about such developments (11 out of 22 or 50% were aware).

**Box 5. Example of how the 2017 EQF Recommendation has informed national debate**

**France:** the European policy agenda was not at the heart of the French reform process, but has gradually entered into national discussions. The result of this has been an alignment with the European agenda, despite this agenda not being the main driver for the reform process<sup>154</sup>. This alignment with EU policies – and more specifically, with the 2017 EQF Recommendation – can be seen in the definition of level descriptors; the choice of having eight levels instead of five (as was previously the case); and the levelling of the *Baccalauréat Général* (the qualification awarded at the end of upper-secondary general education). As a result, the new law of 5 September 2018 on the “freedom to choose one’s professional future”, which includes a re-organisation of the French qualifications framework, even makes an explicit reference to the 2017 Recommendation in the third paragraph of article L.6113-1 of the labour code.

Beyond those reforms that immediately relate to the EQF/NQFs, a second type of **reform of the education and training system can be characterised as supporting social integration, mobility and employability. While such reforms do not touch directly upon qualifications systems and are thus not directly linked to the EQF, they potentially support the impact of EQF/NQFs at national level** by providing resources such as financial means, guidance and institutional settings for individuals and organisations to take advantage of the establishment of NQFs. Examples include new financing mechanisms and/or increased budgets for lifelong learning, which have been decided in Germany, Finland, France and Slovenia. They also include the bringing together of education and the world of work in certain countries (the establishment of Sector Skills Councils in Serbia; the Finnish VET reform, launched 2018 to increase flexibility in educational institutions).

The evidence presented above suggests that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has, to some extent, informed reforms concerning qualifications systems at national level. The views of different stakeholder groups gathered in the survey and PC are generally positive regarding the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on modernisation reforms, but a more in-depth analysis of the national context in the case studies shows that the extent of this impact can differ. In particular, the modernisation of education and training systems was operationalised through reforms focusing on the development or renewal of NQFs and related measures, such as the generalisation of the use of learning outcomes, the introduction of modularisation and validation mechanisms or the introduction of new qualification types. In countries where debates over the levelling specific qualifications caused some controversy (e.g. in Germany, France), stakeholders referred to the 2017 EQF Recommendation in order to reach agreement. Beyond this, reform carried out since 2017 to promote employability, mobility and the social integration of learners and workers – for instance, through the development of new funding mechanisms for lifelong learning, or closer coordination between education providers and the labour market – are well aligned with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. However, the drivers of such reforms are deeply rooted in national contexts (e.g. demographic change, youth unemployment, skills gaps, increasing social inequalities), and therefore do not necessarily relate to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

## **Wider Objective 2: Employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers**

The 2017 EQF Recommendation defines its second wider objective as contributing to employability, mobility and the social integration of learners and workers. The high-level

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<sup>154</sup> As paraphrased from Sgarzi, M. (2020). French exceptionalism tested against the Lisbon strategy principles. The case of the Qualifications Framework implementation process. In: bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschafts-pädagogik – online, issue 39, 1-16. P.1. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi_bwpat39.pdf)

nature of this objective, its dependence on multiple factors and policies, and the lack of a direct relationship to the EQF means that no visible contribution of actions relating to the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be expected. Moreover, to date, no impact studies exist that seek to establish a causal link between the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the development of NQFs, and indicators on employability, mobility and social integration.<sup>155</sup> In answering the evaluation question, it is therefore only possible to refer to stakeholders' perceptions and to anecdotal evidence regarding the possible mechanisms via which the EQF supports this wider objective.

**Overall, stakeholder** (mostly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, and holders of qualifications) **views** (gathered via the survey and PC) **show agreement that the EQF contributes to this wider objective, specifically when discussing mobility and employability, but also express difficulties in assessing this, and point to other driving factors.** Around half of respondents<sup>156</sup> agreed or strongly agreed that European cooperation has increased within the framework of the EQF:

- mobility (71 respondents or 58 % in the survey, and 133 respondents or 58 %<sup>157</sup> in the PC);
- employability (57 respondents or 46 % in the survey, and 141 respondents or 61 % in the PC);
- social integration (41 respondents or 34 % in survey and 103 respondents or 45 % in the PC)).

**A substantial share of respondents could not answer this question<sup>158</sup>, which underlines the difficulty of establishing a causal link.** For example, respondents to the public consultation mentioned other factors, such as personal motivations, the economic situation or employment policy as drivers of mobility and employability. Furthermore, some PC respondents across all consulted stakeholder types raised the point that while countries may formally adopt an NQF, these NQFs may not be used effectively in practice to ensure compatibility between learning outcomes and qualifications, which hinders the quality and mobility of education. A specific example of this argument was provided by two national student unions in the Czech Republic and Serbia, indicating that even though an NQF is in place, it may not be used to link or position the learning outcomes associated with qualifications.

Meanwhile, the **stakeholder consultation also provided anecdotal examples of how the EQF could have an impact on mobility, employability and social integration.** While the link to the 2017 EQF Recommendation remains distant, these examples offer some indication of possible pathways for wider impacts. For example, interviews with European Network of Information Centres – National Academic Recognition Information Centres

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<sup>155</sup> Bohlinger (2019), in her research on the impact of the EQF 10 years after its launch, found little evidence that the EQF had solved the challenges for which it was developed. The author provided several examples of countries in which NQFs exist primarily "on paper", but had no significant influence on labour market or education activities. In particular, she points to the fact that "there is no evidence that NQFs and the EQF in particular have any effect on social transformation and the establishment of educational meritocracies where the only barriers learners encountered are the limits of their own potential to learn". Her research is one of the very few academic papers published on the impact of the EQF since 2017. Bohlinger, S. (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework, *Journal of Education and Work*, Volume 32, Issue 4, pp. 393-406

<sup>156</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include holders of qualification(s), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients.

<sup>157</sup> This was covered by three survey statements. European cooperation in the framework of the EQF...: 1) ...has increased the number of individuals who crossed my country's borders for work and/or study (in- and outgoing) (133, or 58 % agreed or strongly agreed); 2) ...has increased the number of individuals in my country moving between jobs / sectors (100, or 44 % agreed or strongly agreed); 3) ...has increased the number of learners who move between different types and levels of education in my country (134, or 59 % agreed or strongly agreed).

<sup>158</sup> Survey: up to 35 %; PC: up to 75 %.



(ENIC-NARIC) showed that EQF/NQF levels are used by recognition bodies in several countries to support recognition decisions for further learning<sup>159</sup>. In interviews, representatives of ENIC-NARIC centres indicated that determining the level of a qualification has become more straightforward in the case of those qualifications with an EQF level. This allows individual recognition processes to advance more efficiently and focus more on the content of qualifications. Further anecdotal evidence was found in four specific country case studies:

- **Mobility of learners and workers**, especially across borders, is seen by national stakeholders interviewed in Germany and Finland as working well, and that since 2017, it has been further facilitated by developments inspired by the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In Germany, the demand for information via the DQR portal is high, especially from foreign workers. However, the transparency of the German education system for foreign citizens is still deemed low, with a need for clearer and less complex information. In Finland, authorities working with qualifications and education and training provider interviewed pointed to improved conditions for the recognition of learning outcomes achieved abroad, including ECTS and Diploma Supplement, to explain the increase in certain types of international learner mobility between 2017 and 2019 (e.g. short-term mobility in higher education, and incoming mobility in VET).
- **Social integration** through more flexible and individualised learning paths is said to have improved in Finland, thanks to better guidance and financial support for adult education. While no immediate link was found to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, such guidance can be facilitated by the development of NQFs and the approach to qualifications. In France, existing studies on personal training accounts and other schemes supporting re-skilling and up-skilling (e.g. the validation of prior learning, structured against the NQF) point to the crucial importance of personal guidance and additional (also financial) support for the least qualified workers to take advantage of these reforms and implement ambitious re-/up-skilling projects<sup>160</sup>.

Despite anecdotal examples, the present study found no systematic evidence to confirm that the of the EQF and NQFs had a measurable effect on end beneficiaries, which would have resulted in increasing numbers of mobile learners and workers. Against this backdrop, the study also highlights a finding from a recent Cedefop study, which confirms that in 2020, the EQF had not yet reached European citizens (both students and employers alike) on a broad scale<sup>161</sup>.

The evidence presented above does not allow to conclude that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has had a direct impact on employability, mobility and the social integration of learners and workers, despite positive views of different stakeholder groups, due to the lack of causal link and the high-level nature of the wider objective. Rather, its impact has been in terms of informing those reforms that might ultimately lead to these types of measurable changes in individual behaviours.

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<sup>159</sup> Cedefop (2021). National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019 : qualifications frameworks : transparency and added value for end users. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/105773>

<sup>160</sup> Stephanus, C., & Vero, J. (2022). Se reconvertir, c'est du boulot ! Enquête sur les travailleurs non qualifiés. In: Céreq Bref, 418. <https://www.cereq.fr/se-reconvertir-cest-du-boulot-enquete-sur-les-travailleurs-non-qualifies>  
Vero, J., & Dubois, J.-M. (2019). Le compte personnel de formation peut-il ouvrir les chemins de la liberté ? In: Berthet, T., & Vanuls, C. (eds.). Vers une flexicurité à la française ? Toulouse: Octarès, pp. 233-253.

Werquin, P. (2021). Recognition of prior learning in France: Where have the RPL-ready applicants gone? In: *European Journal of Education, Research, Development and Policy*, 56/3, 391-406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12465>

<sup>161</sup> Cedefop (2020). Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995-2035: scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series, No 114. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/794471>, p. 23.

## Unintended consequences<sup>162</sup>

Given the wide objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, all consequences relating to the modernisation of national education and training systems, lifelong learning systems and employment systems fall within its scope. The identification of unintended consequences is based on an analysis of the existing literature and of 26 survey responses from different groups of stakeholders<sup>163</sup> that referred to unintended consequences.

The evidence presented in Chapter 3 of this report shows a beneficial unintended consequence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation: its contribution to the development of multinational qualifications frameworks outside Europe, such as the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)<sup>164</sup>. In addition, the EQF triggered the development of NQFs and reforms to develop learning outcomes-based approaches in countries beyond the EU and those already part of the EQF<sup>165</sup>. Different groups of stakeholders who responded to the survey<sup>166</sup> mentioned a variety of consequences, none of which are in fact unintended; examples include national developments regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as providing European points of comparison against which NQFs can be assessed. No important or significant negative unintended consequences were either identified or mentioned by stakeholders consulted.<sup>167</sup>

### 4.1.1.2. Effectiveness of the implementation of key provisions of the Recommendation

This section of the report reviews the implementation of the various provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation by Member States. In addition, it looks at the observable effects of its implementation, taking into account possible bottlenecks and limitations. **The analysis shows that most provisions can be considered to have been implemented effectively.** Figure 2 below summarises the status of implementation by June 2022, presented in further detail throughout Chapter 3. The provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are grouped around four categories (strengthening the EQF; links between formal and non-formal learning; common principles; and outreach), each of which is discussed in further detail below. The figure presents the developments in EU Member States and non-EU EQF countries separately.

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<sup>162</sup> 15 survey respondents provided insights on positive consequences and 11 on negative consequences of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. However, any of these consequences could be considered as unintended.

<sup>163</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include public authority or authority working with qualifications, end beneficiary representatives, and education and training providers.

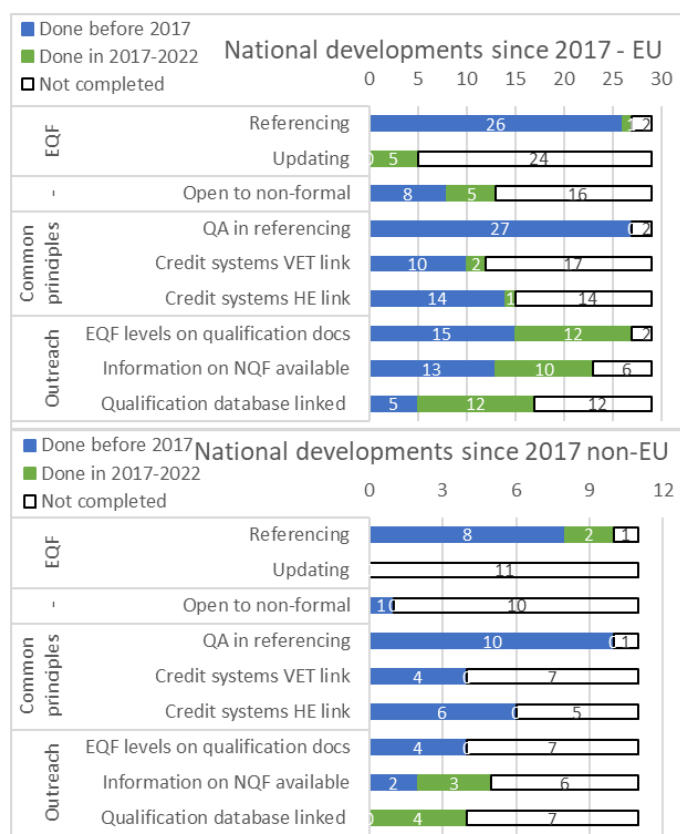
<sup>164</sup> Desk research carried out for the present study indicates that the EQF has been used in the development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) (See: <https://acqf.africa/> [accessed 9 November 2022]). Supported by ETF experts, the development of the ACQF has taken on board the experiences gained during the development and implementation the EQF. See, for example, Africa-EU partnership (2020), African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF); ACQF Capacity Development Programme (2020-2021); Learning and developing a common understanding of qualifications frameworks: [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-11/acqf\\_report\\_webinars.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-11/acqf_report_webinars.pdf) [accessed 9 November 2022]

<sup>165</sup> The evaluation of the ETF's actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries in 2020 concluded that, inspired by the EQF, "ETF interventions had an impact on the development of partner countries' mechanisms, frameworks and processes for implementing reforms of qualifications systems." Ockham-IPS, 3s, FGB (2020), Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries, p.40

<sup>166</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include public authority or authority working with qualifications, end beneficiary representatives, and education and training providers.

<sup>167</sup> Academic literature considers as possible unintended consequences 'policy borrowing', the destabilisation of existing education structures, and the distracting of attention from more pressing national educational issues) (see: Young, M., (2005), National Qualifications Frameworks: Their feasibility for effective implementation in developing countries (Geneva, ILO); Chakroun, B. (2010). National Qualification Frameworks: from policy borrowing to policy learning, *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2010, Part I, 2010; McBride, V., & Keevy, J. (2010). Is the national qualifications framework a broken promise? A dialogue, *Journal of Educational Change* 11:193–203. Also see: Allais, S. (2014), Selling Out Education National Qualifications Frameworks and the Neglect of Knowledge; Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. One survey respondent highlighted the problem of brain drain from economically weaker countries.

**Figure 2. National developments on key aspects of 2017 EQF Recommendation (EU / Non-EU)**



Source: results of the mapping conducted as part of the study. See Chapter 3 for more details<sup>168</sup>.

Figure 2 shows that the **most significant developments since 2017 at national level can be observed in the area of outreach**, based on a considerable increase in the number of countries indicating EQF levels on qualification documents, making information on the NQF available, and linking the data fields of national registers to the Europass QDR.

**Developments have also been observed in relation to the strengthening of the EQF** (via attention being paid to the updating of referencing, and the further use of learning outcomes). The **encouragement of links between formal, non-formal and informal learning is also observed, but to a smaller extent**. This is partially due to the fact that these are mostly continuations from processes initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, and therefore offer **less scope for further improvements** after 2017.

**Very limited new developments in terms of changes in practice have been observed in relation to the common principles on quality assurance and credit systems**. Both were written into the 2017 EQF Recommendation in such a way as to **largely capture the status quo**, and no subsequent activities have been actively encouraged since. Any developments in these areas identified by the present study are primarily the consequence of national-level reflections on national qualifications systems; the fact that the 2017 EQF Recommendation mentions areas in relation to quality assurance or credit systems plays no visible role.

This section of the report explores these broader findings in more detail for each of the key provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, reviewing its effects at individual, national and European levels.

<sup>168</sup> The situation in 2017 (in blue) is compared against progress made in 2017-2022 (in green). The white bars indicate the number of NQFs in which no results of such activities were identified in the mapping.

## Strengthening the implementation of the EQF through (re)referencing

The approach to referencing applied in the 2017 EQF Recommendation is a continuation of that initiated in the 2008 EQF Recommendation; Chapter 2 of this report has highlighted how the referencing of NQFs to the EQF had already advanced substantially prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. **The 2017 EQF Recommendation did not include new referencing provisions, but effectively facilitated the continuation of the process initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, which has been shown as time-intensive at national level, but also allows for critical reflection and engagement with stakeholders.** This can be seen, for instance, in more recent referencing reports from Finland (2018), and continued developments in Portugal and Ireland (see Box 6).

**In the period 2017-2022, three from the remaining six referencing reports were completed, with the remaining three lagging behind due to factors at national level.** The following three NQFs remain to be referenced:

- **Spain:** a large number of (types of) qualifications, also outside the formal domain, to be included within the national framework; regional differences in the approach to education taken by autonomous communities<sup>169</sup>.
- **German Community in Belgium:** work still remains to be done to ensure the transparency of the methodology used to link the NQF with the EQF; to make guidelines and information accessible; and to finalise arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>170</sup>.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** a federal structure with restricted mandates of various competent authorities<sup>171</sup>; a draft version of the NQF has been developed and is awaiting formal approval by the national authorities<sup>172</sup>.

### Box 6. Experiences with the referencing process

In most countries, the preparations and setting up of NQF have been lengthy processes. For example, in **Finland**, preparation of the NQF began in 2004. While proposals were taken to parliament in 2010 and 2012, these were rejected on both occasions. The NQF was finally formally adopted on 1 March 2017. After this formal adoption, the referencing process of the NQF to the EQF could be initiated, resulting in the 2018 referencing report.

In **Portugal**, the process of setting up a NQF began in 2009. Once established, the NQF was referenced to the EQF as presented in one report focusing on higher education, and another on the other qualifications within the framework. To further support stakeholders in understanding the key concepts and how to use the NQF in **Portugal**, a number of key publications were developed that sought to provide additional information about the results of the referencing process.

The process of referencing and updates is seen as a valuable opportunity to reflect on an NFQ systematically within a European context. In **Ireland**, this process brought an alternative perspective, with the role of international experts being particularly welcomed. Re-referencing was an in-depth process, with several studies being commissioned to support it. It also provided an opportunity to consider the NFQ in relation to the European frameworks for both HE and lifelong learning, which has supported domestic policies in relation to the opening up of systems, and improvements in transparency, trust and cooperation between educational sectors. Referencing has had a major influence on developments in key areas, by virtue of the fact that Irish authorities used it as an opportunity to look deeply into qualifications and to engage widely with stakeholders.

<sup>169</sup> Cedefop (2021). *European inventory on NQF 2020 – Spain*.

<sup>170</sup> Cedefop (2021). *European inventory on NQF 2020 – Belgium*, p. 9.

<sup>171</sup> Based on presentation by Bosnia to the AG, as reported in European Commission (2019), Minutes of the 50<sup>th</sup> meeting of the EQF Advisory Group 11-12 June 2019.

<sup>172</sup> Cedefop; ETF (2021). *European inventory on NQF 2020 – Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 12.

Such activities probably had a stronger influence than making the referencing report publicly available.

**While most of the AG members representing Member States who were interviewed see the referencing exercise and its criteria as a necessary first condition for transparency, which allows the comparability or portability of qualifications, the overall effectiveness of this process also depends on how the implementation is carried out in practice.** More specifically, EQF AG members indicate that referencing alone is not a *sufficient* condition; by itself, it does not remove the limitations on levelling methods or rectify the insufficient trust in the qualifications levelled – or other barriers such as inconsistent descriptions of qualifications or incomplete or outdated NQFs. Box 7 below discusses such limitations, and highlights how these affect the comparability of qualifications.

#### **Box 7. Limitations to the role of the referencing process**

1. Within and between countries, there are **various ways to level qualifications**. Such variation is considered by interviewed EQF AG members to reduce trust in levelling decisions. Often, qualifications within formal education and training systems are levelled as a group, while a more detailed method is applied to qualifications outside the formal systems. For example, academic experts with knowledge of the German situation indicated that levelling qualifications as a group (*en bloc*) does not allow the precise allocation of qualifications to a level. Cedefop studies confirm this challenge, indicating that firstly, the social and contextual considerations differ by country and education sector, influencing levelling decisions; secondly, levelling procedures differ between countries for different types of qualification from different segments of the qualifications system (e.g. technical/linguistic vs. social/political approaches), challenging the comparability, transparency and trust of qualifications. Furthermore, the descriptions of learning outcomes differ in terms of length, level of detail and abstraction, structure and the inclusion of types of learning outcomes (occupational outcomes, transversal outcomes, general knowledge subjects), also hindering the comparison of qualifications<sup>173</sup>.
2. **Completing the referencing or updating process are crucial steps to building understanding, but should not be mistaken for a way to increase recognition to qualifications included in NQFs from abroad.** Representatives for ENIC-NARIC in France reported a challenge relating to qualifications developed and awarded by non-state-regulated organisations. In France, qualifications registered in the RNCP are not considered to be “non-formal”; they have full parity of esteem with qualifications issued within the state-regulated education and training system. While this is usually accepted and understood in anglophone countries, some countries such as Belgium or Germany do not fully recognise these qualifications within their education systems, nor in the labour market (for instance, when it comes to tariff agreements). ENIC-NARIC France reported that students who had studied in France at private business schools encountered problems in having their higher education qualifications recognised in their home countries (especially in Luxembourg, Switzerland and Norway). In particular, examples were cited of Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Business Administration, delivered by business schools affiliated to French Chambers of Trade and Industry, levels 6 and 7 in the French NQF. These qualifications have a recognised value on the French labour market and are registered in the RNCP.

**The introduction in the 2017 EQF Recommendation of a formal provision that calls for updates to referencing is judged to have been effective, given that the number of updates since 2017 falls within the scope of expectations, and consulted EQF AG members overall perceive an updated referencing as having had a beneficial impact on transparency and comparability.** More specifically, while the number of EQF countries

<sup>173</sup> Cedefop (2020). European qualifications framework. Initial vocational education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper; No 77. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/114528>

that submitted updates in 2017-2022 is relatively small (six, with three more pending; see Chapter 3), this should be understood against a backdrop in which most NQFs had already completed the extensive referencing process not too long before, mostly within 10 years. This is a relatively short timeframe for substantial changes in education systems to take place; large numbers of updates therefore cannot yet be expected. Subsection 2.3.1 has already highlighted the fact that there is no objective measure to determine the need for updates. This is the responsibility of the EQF countries themselves, which could possibly have a negative effect on trust and the transparency of the EQF in the future. Half of AG members (17 out of 33 respondents) suggested in the survey that when the structure, levels or level descriptors in the NQF change, such an update would be appropriate.

Furthermore, members of the AG interviewed from France, the Netherlands and Ireland, where the updating of referencing was completed, provided illustrations of the impact of the updated referencing report: **increasing international comparability and transparency, but also stimulating national-level reflections on their national qualifications systems**<sup>174</sup>. The effects of updating relate to critically reflecting on the NQF from a European perspective in order to update the NQF to the changing national context, and improve the transparency of the national system towards other countries. As illustrated by the reflections of French national stakeholders (public authorities and authorities working with qualifications) on updating, the referencing criteria and feedback process were felt to be conducive to stimulating critical reflections, and helped in understanding what national choices would need explicit rationalisation for partners in other countries.

Beyond the process of referencing and its updates, the use of learning outcomes is a cross-cutting element that is fundamental to the functioning of the EQF and to its implementation. This is why it is reviewed here. **The various studies and project work on learning outcomes that have been conducted (see subsection 3.1.3) are found to be an effective means of strengthening the implementation of the EQF, based on perceived trends in the use of learning outcomes and stakeholders' assessment of the support provided.** Specifically, responses to the survey suggest that the use of learning outcomes has increased during the study period, with 91 out of 119 survey respondents (77 %), mostly consisting of public authorities, reporting that they believed learning outcomes were used more often now compared with 2017. In addition, respondents to the same survey (mostly consisting of public authorities) confirmed the importance of the work of Cedefop and the ETF in providing conceptual and empirical support on specific aspects of implementation (such as defining and using learning outcomes, or comparing qualifications). Only three respondents out of 102, or 3 %, were unaware of input from Cedefop or did not find it useful. None of the respondents from outside the EU reported being unaware of input from the ETF, or not find it useful. Subsection 4.2.2 below explores the effectiveness and efficiency of such support in greater detail.

In conclusion, those parts of the 2017 Recommendation that codify the referencing criteria and the overall approach to referencing and the updating of referencing can be considered an effective continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. The referencing process continued in the same way after 2017, with only three NQFs still remaining to be referenced. The updating of NQFs has become a more common practice following the formalisation of this requirement in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Together, these provisions have contributed to the increased use and understanding of learning outcomes across EQF countries. This has further facilitated visible changes at national level, supporting the better comparability of qualifications, the greater transparency of education and training systems, and trust between education and training systems, both within and across countries. The number of countries that have completed the referencing of their NQFs (or the updating of such referencing) increased modestly in the period 2017-2022, which further solidifies the EQF's approach among the participating countries. Nonetheless, the referencing process could further strengthen trust by stimulating the use of more consistent descriptions of

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<sup>174</sup> This issue was raised in interviews with representatives from France, the Netherlands and Ireland.

learning outcomes, the use of identifiable levelling processes, as well as transparency regarding social/contextual considerations in the levelling and in terms of the levelling procedures used, and more awareness-raising and communication about NQFs/the EQF, to trickle down trust from experts and policymakers to the end beneficiaries of qualifications.

### Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning

The EQF is designed as an open and comprehensive framework, allowing NQFs to include qualifications from any level, educational or training sector to be linked to it, as long as these qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes. By extension, **this level of comprehensiveness depends in practice on the extent to which the NQFs linked to the EQF are comprehensive in their scope, which continues to vary considerably between EQF countries.** On the one hand, NQFs in six countries<sup>175</sup> do not include qualifications from specific formal sectors of education (i.e. general education). On the other, since 2017, an additional five NQFs have started to include qualifications from outside the formal domain (see subsection 2.3.2).

The 2017 EQF Recommendation does not explicitly recommend that EQF countries should expand the comprehensiveness of their national frameworks and systems, which is why any developments in this area cannot be directly attributed to the Recommendation. However, **the EQF does provide an overarching framework** and supports broader developments in that direction. In addition, the EQF AG works towards making NQFs more open to qualifications that are not yet included via discussions and the exchange of experience (e.g. the PLA on non-formal qualifications in Vienna, 2018). Such openness is **likely to differ between national contexts**, however – as confirmed by consultations with national stakeholders, including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiary:

- In a first group of countries with a high level of autonomous developments (France, Ireland, the Netherlands), respondents did not attribute national developments in the increased comprehensiveness of NQFs to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. They said that the observed changes related to ongoing national reforms to NQFs had mainly been prompted by national developments, and not directly by the 2017 EQF Recommendation. While such developments are not necessarily responses to specific provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation or its predecessor, they can still be viewed within the context of the broader EQF process. For instance, both France and Ireland had already put in place NQFs before the EQF existed, but have since taken steps to better align these frameworks with the structure and scope of the EQF.
- In another group of countries (Poland, Serbia), the respondents were more confident in attributing an effect to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, closely linking national activities with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which they said had maintained the momentum for operationalising the NQFs (see Box 8 below).

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<sup>175</sup> AT, CH, CZ, FR, LI and LT

**Box 8. Examples in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation is considered to have had an impact on the comprehensiveness of NQFs**

**Poland:** the 2017 EQF Recommendation helped in maintaining the principle that the NQF should serve as a comprehensive framework. The inclusion of growing numbers of market qualifications has occurred mostly after 2017. This development can be linked to public support for the inclusion of qualifications provided by Educational Research Institute (Poland), which has been funded through the European Social Fund (**ESF**), and which might not have been possible if not for the revised EQF Recommendation, which put this issue on the policy agenda. Another important improvement has been the introduction of new regulations leading to the introduction of Level 5 full qualifications in higher education (short cycle) in 2018.

**Serbia:** many activities have taken place, directed at the further development of the NQFS and of policies concerning lifelong learning. These activities led to the adoption of the NQFS Law in 2018, creating a legal basis for the formation of organisations and bodies responsible for its implementation. In 2018, the members of the NQFS Council were appointed, and a Qualifications Agency was established, as well as 12 Sector Skills Councils. According to education and training provider and end beneficiary representatives consulted in Serbia, these activities and developments are closely related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

The differences between countries identified in the case studies, as described above, are also visible at large, given that by 2022, **around half of EQF countries have NQFs that are not open to qualifications outside the formal domain – even if work on this is ongoing, and such qualifications can be linked to NQFs through validation arrangements.** More specifically, a majority of the countries (26) have worked on changing the way in which qualifications awarded outside of formal education and training can be included, with efforts including pilots on the inclusion of such qualifications, the development of procedures, and the preparation of legislation<sup>176</sup>. While these efforts have not yet led to visible changes in most countries, it is important to underline that this does not mean that in those settings, learning in non-formal or informal settings cannot be validated or somehow indirectly linked to the NQF. Provisions for the validation of non-formal or informal learning exist to some extent in all referenced NQFs<sup>177</sup>. For example, the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning recommends that validation arrangements are linked to NQFs.<sup>178</sup> Similarly, arrangements for the validation of all forms of learning is one of the EQF's referencing criteria, included since the first round of referencing was initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. Against this context, most EQF countries had to some extent already built links between formal, non-formal and informal learning since 2008, and further worked in this direction in line with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. . This finding was confirmed by the survey, in which a majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the EQF Recommendation had supported flexible learning (84 out of 121, or 69 % of respondents).

**Joint work on the allocation of levels to international qualifications in NQFs is another area through which links between different types of qualifications can be encouraged.** As highlighted in subsection 2.3.2, the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not propose activities at national level in this regard, but instead focused on preparatory work at European level (through the EQF AG).. The activities formulated in the 2017 EQF Recommendation align with activities that had already been undertaken between 2008 and 2017 and support for ongoing activities has been provided by the European Commission,

<sup>176</sup> Cedefop, National Qualifications frameworks (NQFs) online tool. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool>. One example of how countries are working on including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training comes from Germany, where a pilot process has been carried out and evaluated. A working group designed procedures for levelling such qualifications, defined quality assurance criteria, and described the role of evaluators. In 2023, an introductory phase of the process is expected to begin; selected qualifications awarded outside formal education and training will be levelled to the DQR.

<sup>177</sup> European Commission (2020), [Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>178</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1–5.



as provided for by the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The work supported between 2017 and 2022 focused on defining possible voluntary procedures and has not led to the adoption or establishment of concrete procedures that would permit more structured communication and consultation channels between EQF countries regarding the allocation of levels to international qualifications. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not define the establishment of such procedures as an explicit objective, any progress towards formulating a common approach to international qualifications (whether or not this was the aim of the Recommendation) would depend on such procedures being approved and established. As such, it is concluded that beyond procedural attention to this provision, limited actual progress can be observed.

In conclusion, a review of developments between 2017 and 2022 provides evidence that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been somewhat effective in encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning. While those NQFs that are linked to the EQF are increasingly enabling better links between various types of learning, this cannot be attributed directly to the 2017 EQF Recommendation *per se*. Nevertheless, the proportion of the entire education and training qualifications landscape across Europe that is covered by NQFs linked to the EQF has grown since 2017.

### Linking common provisions on quality to qualifications

The 2017 EQF Recommendation's common provisions on quality were written to reflect the status quo in 2017. This means that no changes in practice are to be expected as a result of this Recommendation. Even though the 2017 EQF Recommendation finetunes provisions from the 2008 EQF Recommendation in its change in focus from qualifications frameworks to individual qualifications, such a shift was not intended to lead to observable changes in the way that countries organise the quality assurance of qualifications in their NQFs. The quality principles were deliberately written to align with pre-existing quality standards. This is illustrated in the examples of three countries – Germany, the Netherlands and Slovenia – analysed in detail for Case study 4 (see Box 9 below). The examples of these countries show that even where the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not **have a direct effect on quality assurance principles, the existing structures of NQFs are perceived as contributing to trust in the quality of a qualification.**

#### Box 9. Examples of the alignment of the 2017 EQF Recommendation's common principles on quality assurance with existing QA principles

**Germany's** NQF, the DQR, was introduced as a non-regulating tool with the aim of fostering comparability within the German education system, but without influence on its institutional setup. The introduction of the DQR did not, therefore, affect German QA systems. However, the inclusion of a qualification into the DQR is generally viewed as a quality label, as it contributes to rendering qualifications more comparable between Germany's federal states, as well as being more oriented towards competences and learning outcomes compared with the situation prior to the introduction of the DQR. Importantly, this does not extend to the non-formal and informal learning sectors, since these are not covered by the DQR. The overall consensus seems to be that there is no need to change existing QA processes, as they already are well respected and trusted.

In the **Netherlands**, developments surrounding the EQF have not raised questions about the quality assurance principles in place with regard to formal education. Meanwhile, private providers, which are responsible for most education outside the formal sector have non-mandatory common standards in place among themselves, which predate the provisions of the EQF. Legally, the NLQF has therefore not been set up as a quality assurance mechanism. Implicitly, however, the widely trusted practice of subjecting qualifications from outside the formal education and training system to rigorous validity and levelling tests helps to ensure that their inclusion in the NLQF has some value.

In **Slovenia**, the NQF serves as a 'gatekeeper' to quality assurance. The inclusion of a qualification in the Slovenian Qualifications Framework (SQF) is therefore regarded a label of

quality. Importantly, advances in terms of QA in Slovenia have been formalised through the introduction of a standalone QA framework in February 2017 – three months ahead of the publication of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Key achievements are that all qualifications must be formulated in terms of learning outcomes, and that they must also be approved by a national professional commission.

In addition to these findings from the case studies, **stakeholders consulted in the survey (mostly public authorities) also appear to see a link between NQFs and quality assurance systems.** A total of 69 out of 104 respondents (67 %) agreed or strongly agreed that the combined provisions of MS Recommendation 3, the content of referencing criteria 5 and 6, as well as Annex IV, have strengthened links between QA systems and NQFs, with no differences between respondent groups (i.e. irrespective of the respondent's institution type, EU or non-EU MS, and the time at which the respondent's country carried out referencing). The possible reason for this positive assessment could relate to the fact that respondents may not have separated the impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation from the impact of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, since in practice, it is difficult to distinguish between the two<sup>179</sup>. Even where the 2008 EQF Recommendation also did not propose a radically different approach to quality assurance, the continued emphasis on quality and trust in qualifications in the two Recommendations appears to have at least some effect for consulted stakeholders.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of the 2017 provision in sparking changes in the practical application of quality assurance principles to all qualifications in NQFs has been limited, but the continued focus on quality assurance, especially in a changing context, remains important. It was designed to reflect the status quo in 2017, and no concrete changes are observed. In addition, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has not led to further follow-up at European or national level to formulate additional activities. While the 2017 Recommendation has not resulted in observable changes to quality assurance principles, consulted stakeholders (mostly public authorities) are generally positive about the role of the EQF in quality assurance, and also recognise the role of NQFs as a quality label.

### Linking the common provisions on credit systems to qualifications

The common provisions on credit systems aim to increase the links between these systems and each country's NQF – which should, in essence, help to build links between the credit systems used in different sectors of education, and as such support flexible pathways. The study **has observed marginal changes in the way that credit systems are organised and linked to the NQF as a result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as the majority of countries with credit systems linked to NQF had already done so prior to 2017.** It may be considered that these systems were already aligned with many credit principles, as might be expected from an advanced and functioning credit system (e.g. increasing flexible learning pathways and the transfer of said credits).

**Given that the linking of credit systems to NQFs is a national competence, this topic was not prioritised either by the EQF AG or by the European Commission.** There was also no need to do so, as the provision on linking credit systems to NQFs allowed flexibility for each MS to decide the manner of implementation on the basis of the national context, if and where appropriate. Indeed, the case studies show that the EQF countries have mapped their existing provisions for credit systems to the provisions of the Recommendation, but have not in effect changed the linking of such systems to their NQFs. This is understandable, as the principles outlined in the 2017 EQF Recommendation in reference to individual sectors are defined in such a broad manner that they essentially fit all of the credit systems in place for individual sectors.

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<sup>179</sup> Each item mentioned in Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation R is covered at least to some extent by an item of Annex III of the 2008 recommendation, which in the end aims, through system-level quality assurance, for the same level of quality standards in individual qualifications.

Indeed, **national approaches to credit systems across the EQF countries are inclusive of the principles outlined in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as was found to be evident in many cases.** In particular, the adoption of the learning outcomes approach within credit systems (e.g. in Belgium's Flemish Community<sup>180</sup> and Belgium's French Community<sup>181</sup>), the facilitation of national and international mobility, the support of flexible learning pathways (e.g. in Latvia<sup>182</sup>), and improved cooperation between stakeholders (e.g. in Ireland<sup>183</sup>) were identified as objectives within several credit systems that overlap with the principles for credit systems outlined in Annex V. Additional examples from the relevant case study on credit systems and principles can be seen in Box 10 below.

**In a number of cases in which credit systems shared principles that were referenced in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, improved opportunities were observed between education and the labour market, from the perspective of lifelong learning.** (e.g. in Denmark<sup>184</sup>), **improved academic and labour mobility, as well as more flexible career pathways and student mobility** (e.g. in French-speaking Belgium,<sup>185</sup> Estonia<sup>186</sup> and France<sup>187</sup>), in line with the findings of the survey. Around half of survey respondents (58 out of 104, or 56 %) indicated that Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation had contributed to increased opportunities for the transfer of learning outcomes across different education sectors through credit systems. This was especially the case among respondents from public authorities (41 out of 58, or 71 %), EU countries (44 of 58, or 76 %), and countries that had referenced by the end of 2017 (36 of 58, or 62 %).

**As there is no clear target against which overall effectiveness with regard to credit systems can be evaluated, it is difficult to draw a conclusion on effectiveness. No substantial changes were observed that respond directly to efforts linked in the 2017 EQF Recommendation.** The main barrier identified for the introduction of such revisions relates to the structural reforms to education systems that would be required to do so. This means that if broader reforms were already planned, provision MS4 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on credit systems could also have been included as such. By itself, however, it is not sufficient to initiate reforms. In the only two countries where changes related to the linking of credit systems to the NQF were observed,<sup>188</sup> these were combined with legal changes that were unrelated to the EQF as such, but which sought to provide clarification regarding credits for certain types of qualifications within the NQF<sup>189</sup>. Box 10 provides further examples of how the credit system principles outlined in the 2017 EQF Recommendation are reflected in national approaches and in other European instruments, even where no explicit response to the 2017 EQF Recommendation was observed.

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<sup>180</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020](#) – Belgium.

<sup>181</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020](#) – Belgium.

<sup>182</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020](#) – Iceland.

<sup>183</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020](#) – Ireland.

<sup>184</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020](#) – Denmark.

<sup>185</sup> Cedefop (2021). *European inventory on NQF 2020 – Belgium*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/belgium-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>186</sup> Cedefop (2021). *European inventory on NQF 2020 – Estonia*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/estonia-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>187</sup> Cedefop (2021). *European inventory of NQFs 2020 – France*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/france-european-inventory-of-nqfs-2020>

<sup>188</sup> Based on Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2017).

<sup>189</sup> In the Netherlands, the legal change focused on specifying the credits for associate degrees, a type of qualification that had been included in the NQF, but was not yet defined as qualification in the law on HE. In Lithuania, the change related to a new opportunity to gain credits for certain VET modules in the general education curriculum.

**Box 10. Examples of principles applied in credit systems for HE and VET that share similarities to the principles of credit systems outlined in Annex V.**

**France:** the long-established ECTS system has contributed to the establishment of flexible career pathways, and facilitates student mobility – both within France and abroad<sup>190</sup>. The competence blocks applied in HE allows units to be transferred between qualifications, and the system meets many of the credit principles defined in Annex V. These include applications for partial validation, supporting flexible learning pathways, as well as the facilitation of international mobility. Quality assurance mechanisms are applied – particularly in the case of qualifications that are included in the RNCP and the specific register of accreditations and certifications for qualifications complementary to a profession. Validated competence blocks are all documented. Despite the similarities between competence blocks and the credit principles described, public authorities and authorities working with qualifications interviewed during the case study did not consider this to be defined as a ‘credit system’.

**Ireland:** the principles of the EQF are regarded as easy to comply with, as the credit system is well-established and functioning, consistent with European principles<sup>191</sup>. In FET, the key principles include transferability, enabling the mobility of learners, and facilitating the transfer of credits such as the increasingly applied ‘exit’ credit awarded to students who do not complete full courses at university, but who can receive credits upon exit that reflect their partial studies. Moreover, ECVET points are assigned for international mobility; people receive a mobility certificate alongside their qualification, managed by Léargas (the national agency for Erasmus+). With regard to documentation, in FET, the assignment of credit values to awards provides transparency as to the size and shape of awards and helps learners, employers, and other users to relate awards to each other in a meaningful way. The credit ranges and values for all QQI award types are set at national level, ensuring stability in the value of credits when minor awards are exchanged or transferred across into major awards. QQI is responsible for the transparent and external quality assurance of HE and FET, and cooperate and communicate with the relevant stakeholders. The recently established Irish Qualifications and Quality Forum (IQQF) met in October 2022, and agreed that there is need to go ‘back to basics’ with the NFQ and to revitalise its original principles while ensuring that these basic principles, including credits, titling conventions, award types etc., are properly conveyed to all relevant stakeholders.

**Portugal:** several similarities exist between the principles of the approach defined for the Portuguese VET credit system, introduced in early 2017, and the 2017 EQF Recommendation on principles for credit systems. The VET principles promote flexibility of qualification paths and individualised learning pathways that can lead to final certification. The principles also enable the understanding of the learning outcomes to be achieved in terms quantitative measures, and re-affirm the value of both certified learning within the scope of the NQF and lifelong learning outside the scope of NQF, by permitting certification within the framework of the national qualifications system. In addition, the transfer and accumulation of credits can be facilitated through the recognition, validation and certification of professional competences (RVCC), which assigns credits that correspond to all or part of training units.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of the 2017 Recommendation’s provision on the linking of credit systems to NQFs cannot be assessed, because it does not propose a specific change from the baseline. No results or wider impacts can be expected from the 2017 EQF Recommendation, either in terms of the establishment of credit systems linked to NQFs or the adoption of the principles of credits. The provision was written to reflect the situation that was already in place in 2017, when the majority of countries had already linked credit systems to their NQFs. Nevertheless, two countries have since implemented changes that link HE or VET credit systems to their NQFs. In general, there are many examples of credit systems that share the principles of credit systems outlined in Annex V of the Recommendation, and these principles of credits are seen to have a beneficial impact on

<sup>190</sup> France competences (2021). [Update to the referencing report of the French qualifications framework to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area.](#)

<sup>191</sup> QQI (2020). [The Irish National Framework of Qualifications.](#) Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA. p. 83.

building links between the education and labour market, and on educational and labour mobility.

## Increasing the outreach of NQFs/the EQF

Chapter 3 highlighted the considerable progress made in presenting the EQF level on qualification documents, as well as making information about the relevant country's NQF widely available. **All MS with referenced NQFs now present EQF levels on some type of qualification documents. This substantiates the effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as it represents a considerable improvement on the situation prior to 2017.** As the development of NQFs has moved from initial referencing to the consolidating of their achievements, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has helped to underline the importance of (additional) outreach, by means of presenting information about EQF levels and NQFs more broadly. Slightly less progress has been achieved by EQF countries outside the EU. However, this is not necessarily a sign of lower effectiveness, as those countries which had not already included EQF levels on qualification documents have been working on more operational issues related to the recent rounds of referencing, including the further internal development of their NQFs and qualifications. The next logical step in the coming years will be for these countries to invest greater attention into outreach, by working to include EQF levels on qualification documents as well as providing more comprehensive information about their NQFs.

**As a result of the implementation of the provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, broader effects can be observed in terms of the accessibility of information about qualifications and their learning outcomes.** The newly developed national qualification databases help to disseminate such information more widely, and make extensive use of the data fields suggested for the electronic publication of information on qualifications in Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. At the time this study was carried out, the qualification databases of 19 countries (17 EU and two non-EU) were linked to the Europass QDR (see Table 10 in chapter 3.4). Internal discussions within the EQF AG indicate that the remaining countries without an operational link between their NQF and the QDR are also working to link their national qualification databases to the QDR, based on the data fields suggested in the 2017 EQF Recommendation<sup>192</sup>. These developments offer clear steps to further improve opportunities for comparing qualifications and qualifications systems, and are therefore found to be effective.

With regard to the availability of information, respondents to the survey carried out for this study (mainly consisting of public authorities) confirm these beneficial developments, with 64 out of 105 survey respondents (56 %) reporting that they had noticed a positive change since 2017 with regard to the accessibility of information about the NQF level of a qualification in their country. Almost similar number reported a positive change in the availability, quality, and user friendliness of information about the EQF. Respondents mention Europass or national qualifications websites as well as websites from governments, Cedefop, the ETF and the European Commission as sources of information about EQF levels and qualifications.

The evidence gathered for this study suggests that significant progress has been made in implementing EQF levels on qualification documents and in improving the availability of information about NQFs. The provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation have played an important role in this improvement. In addition, the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation has also led to the development of national qualifications databases linked to the Europass QDR, thus enhancing the accessibility and comparability of qualifications.

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<sup>192</sup> See for instance EQF AG note 53-3, prepared for EQF Advisory Group, 16-17 November 2020. Also compare Auzinger, M. et.al., 2020, Mapping and analysis of national databases and registers of qualifications.

#### 4.1.1.3. Communication efforts regarding the EQF

This section reviews how **various EQF/NQF communication activities have helped to raise awareness since 2017, and finds that it remains challenging to measure** which communication activities have been most effective, and to what extent. The insights gathered from the stakeholder consultation show that the **professional public in particular appears to be more aware of the EQF** and its purpose than it was before the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This could be because of the significant increase in the number of countries including EQF levels on qualifications and in databases, Europass and registers. Moreover, as the availability of information about the EQF, NQFs and the qualifications they included has improved, **the system has also become more transparent for potential users. However, reaching end beneficiaries and having them use the EQF/NQF remains challenging** in a large majority of countries.

#### Communication activities conducted

To assess the extent to which the communication activities, their scope and the groups targeted have been effective in increasing awareness about the EQF, as well as the extent to which the EQF is used by stakeholders outside the formal referencing process, the present study has looked at the various communication activities implemented, and whether these activities have impacted the use of the EQF/NQF by the intended target groups.

Countries in the 2018 NQF inventory reports state that the approach used to communicate about the EQF is through communicating about the NQF. Hence, **communication about the EQF cannot be meaningfully separated from communicating about the NQF**<sup>193</sup>. By linking EQF/NQF communication together, the meaning and purpose of the EQF is contextualised to the local education systems in a way that stakeholders can relate to. Without a link to an NQF, an EQF level has no meaning or practical application for end beneficiaries. Only by being able to relate national qualifications to a national structure does it become possible to position the EQF and communicate about it.

**This section therefore reviews the communication activities implemented in relation to NQFs, which are the primary channel for implementation. The study finds that communication strategies are often in place, that they rely on a variety of communication channels, and mainly target the professional public.** More specifically, in a survey organised prior to the 2022 PLA on communicating about the EQF, seven of the 10 participating countries that responded had developed an NQF communication strategy (Austria, Belgium [nl], Belgium [fr], Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain), while the rest of the countries responded that communication activities took place without a specific strategy (Finland, Italy, Lithuania). The main channels used for disseminating information about the NQF and EQF were conferences/workshops (in 10 out of the 10 countries); the qualifications database/register and NQF website (in 9 out of the 10); guidelines/manuals (in 7 out of the 10); leaflets/posters (in 6 out of the 10); networking activities and newsletters (in 5 out of the 10); while social media (4 out of 10) and policy instruments (2 out of 10) were less common. The survey also showed that the following stakeholders were targeted: education and training providers (10 out of 10 countries); employers (9 out of 10); guidance and counselling practitioners (9 out of 10); employment services and human resources departments (7 out of 10); the general public (6 out of 10); public administrations (5 out of 10); qualification bodies (5 out of 10); learners/students (5 out of 10); and workers (4 out of 10)<sup>194</sup>. These results show that end beneficiaries are targeted less frequently, which is also confirmed in the case studies carried out in Serbia and Denmark, where no significant activities to raise awareness of the EQF/NQF and their benefits were reported that targeted the wider population.

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<sup>193</sup> NQF Inventory 2018/2020: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>; Also, EQF AG 50-4 provides a summary.

<sup>194</sup> PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

When users themselves were asked in the PC, respondents most often reported using the Europass portal when they needed information about the levels of the EQF and qualifications from other countries, followed by national public websites (e.g. qualifications authorities, relevant agencies and ministries), and the websites of European institutions (e.g. the European Commission, Cedefop). Several respondents mentioned other websites that provided information on NQFs and ESCO. Individual responses included the Public Employment Service (PES); the Assistance Centre for the Recognition of Professional Qualifications and ENIC-NARIC websites; EQF referencing reports; EQF AG documents and NCPs.

## Awareness of NQFs/the EQF

Despite the **communication activities described above**, stakeholder perceptions and other available evidence shows that such efforts have **not led directly to higher levels of awareness among all target audiences**. The results of PC and survey carried out for this study show a slightly different picture, with **respondents indicating that they were well aware of various NQF/EQF provisions** (ranging from 65 % to 84 % of respondents, depending on the provision). However, it must be noted that the survey and PC were completed by respondents with above-average knowledge and awareness of and interest in the NQFs/EQF. Hence, **these results cannot be considered to represent the whole population**. This is also confirmed by the fact that knowledge was found to be lower among the holders or users of qualifications who responded to the PC but had no professional relationship to the NQF (21 out of 42 or 50 % of holders, and 19 out of 33 or 58 % of users were well aware). This compares with 51 out of 60 or 85 % of those working with the quality or recognition of qualifications. For comparison, the PC carried out for the evaluation of the Europass platform found that only 33 % of qualification holders on the Europass platform indicated that they knew their EQF level, while 53 % of employers who assessed *Curriculum Vitae* (CVs) did so.

These findings must be seen in the context of a situation in which **some of the interviewed EQF AG members and third country representatives view the EQF as a technical translation tool, which would not depend on broader awareness among the general public. However, for the EQF to support mobility and facilitate lifelong learning, some outreach towards and basic knowledge among end beneficiaries would be beneficial**. If learners, workers and employers are not aware of the EQF and do not use it, it may reduce the buy-in of key stakeholders and limit its further implementation.<sup>195</sup> Discussions during the PLA on communication helped to identify factors that could increase the effectiveness of communication activities: outreach to end beneficiaries works best when closely linked with the communication of other developments and initiatives that are closer to, and have more direct application for, the user; the use of existing communication channels is preferred over the development of new ones; and communication activities are most effective if they are focused and targeted towards specific stakeholder groups

**Awareness of NQFs is high among educational institutions and employers, but generally lower among the general public**, as was found in evaluations of NQFs in Denmark, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands and Slovenia.<sup>196</sup> An interesting exception to this rule is in Ireland (see Box 11 below), which reports considerably higher awareness levels than in other countries. These are possibly related to the fact that Ireland's qualifications framework has become the effective central pivot of the qualifications system. The level of awareness regarding national tools that relate to the NQF tends to be higher than that of the EQF, but varies greatly between groups. The Czech national stakeholders interviewed (mainly authorities working with qualifications) reported that, while the EQF is regularly presented to young people at student fairs and other student events, awareness among

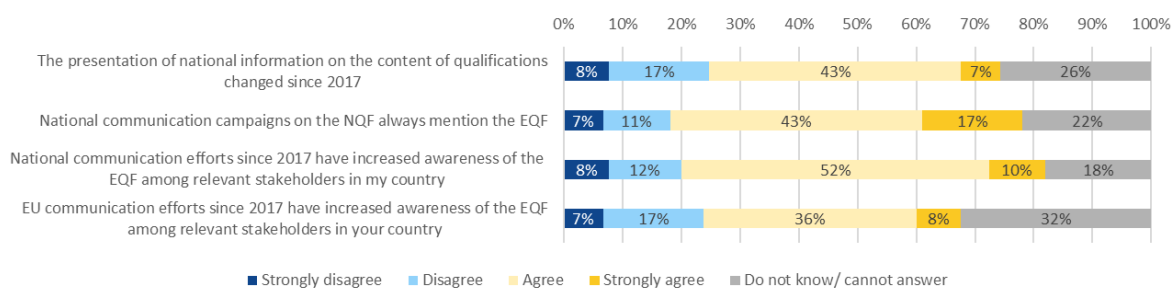
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<sup>196</sup> Ireland: Indecon (2017) The 2017 Policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ; QQI (2020). The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA; Slovenia: Ermenc, S. et al. (2020); PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

employers and the general public remains low<sup>197</sup>. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the NCP NLQF has put a lot of effort into communicating the purpose and functioning of the NLQF, mainly to the community of experts and professionals working on qualifications. National stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) indicate that interest in NLQF among professionals, but also end beneficiaries, is increasing. This is not so much due to the NLQF itself, but to a changing policy context that emphasises lifelong learning, in which the NLQF is gradually playing a more prominent role – e.g. functioning as a *de facto* quality label for training courses that can be funded through the individual learning voucher scheme (STAP-budget) introduced in 2022 (see Box 4).

For both end-users and more technically involved people, the 2018 and 2020 NQF inventory reports show that awareness of the existence and added value of the EQF/NQFs is increasing<sup>198</sup>. These trends are also confirmed in the survey, as presented in Figure 3 below, with only 29 % (31 of 105) disagreeing that national and EU communication has contributed to increased awareness.

**Figure 3. Opinions of surveyed stakeholders about communication activities/outreach with regard to NQFs/EQF**



Note: Total (N)=105.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on a targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, implemented between 9 September and 24 October 2022.

### Box 11. Example of efforts to reach out effectively to the general public

**Ireland:** the QQI has noted that since 2003, Ireland's NFQ 'has become embedded in how we think and speak about qualifications in Ireland.'<sup>199</sup> Among the general public, around 1 in 3 adults was aware of the NFQ in 2017, while 28 % were aware of the EQF<sup>200</sup>. In 2019, a survey of recruitment professionals found that 96 % were aware of the NFQ and 54 % referred to it during recruitment, while the corresponding figures for EQF were 69 % and 17 %, respectively. In addition, 53 % said they wanted to know more about the EQF and 50 % wanted to know more about the recognition of foreign qualifications<sup>201</sup>. These findings were reinforced by the national stakeholders interviewed (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers), who reported that in the FET sector, the NFQ 'fan' diagram was at one time 'on every door in every provider', and that as far as Education Training Boards (ETBs) are concerned, all programme development derives from the NFQ and is consciously done in that way<sup>202</sup>. In contrast, providers would need to be very involved in quality to be aware of the EQF – practitioners would have a low level of awareness (as noted, there is a separate 'global fan' showing the NFQ, EQF and QF-EHEA relationships). At the same time, from an (HE) student perspective, it is

<sup>197</sup> As exemplified by the Upskilling Project, <https://www.edu.cz/podpora-skol/projekty-esif/systemove-prostredi-k-prohlubovani-kompetenci-upskilling/>

<sup>198</sup> Based on summary provided by EQF AG 50-4. See as well NQF Inventory 2018/2020: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>

<sup>199</sup> Foreword by QQI in Coles, M. (2017). National Qualifications Frameworks. Reflections and Trajectories. Dublin: QQI

<sup>200</sup> QQI (2017). A Review of Public Awareness of Qualifications Frameworks.

<sup>201</sup> QQI (2019). Making Sense of Qualifications – Views from Recruitment Professionals in Ireland, <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Qualifications%20interactive.pdf>

<sup>202</sup> <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>



questionable how far people actually understand what lies beneath the NFQ, and what lies behind the 'level' of their qualification.

**With regard to communication, the main challenge revealed by these findings, and confirmed by the national stakeholders interviewed** (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), **relates to the technical nature of the EQF/NQFs**. For instance, it is difficult to communicate added value if take-up is still low: first, it is necessary that qualifications frameworks do indeed cover all relevant formal qualifications, or even beyond. This view was supported by interviewees from Czechia (mainly authorities working with qualifications), who indicated that the NQF does not include all qualifications within the formal sector, some of which can therefore not be validated or linked to the EQF. According to the interviewees, it is easier to communicate the use of an NQF that is already operational. Furthermore, arguments relating to international mobility (i.e. that the EQF would support the international mobility of qualifications) do not seem to work in reality. For example, national stakeholders from the Netherlands (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) indicate that there are many other regulations that support or hamper mobility, and hence that the NQF/EQF cannot be communicated as serving this purpose on its own.

In conclusion, the communication activities undertaken since 2017 have helped to increase awareness about the EQF/NQFs, but also leave scope for further action. Actions to encourage the use of the EQF have increased significantly since 2017, with more countries making reference to EQF levels on registers and newly issued qualifications, and including their NQF in the Europass platform. With more NQFs operational than there were prior to 2017, there is also considerably more work to be done from the perspective of communication. At the same time, in the majority of countries, the broader public (end beneficiaries) remains unaware of the EQF and NQFs and the applicability of these frameworks. These groups have been insufficiently involved in existing communication plans and activities. Reaching end beneficiaries requires more practical communication about NQFs/the EQF, applied to concrete situations and linked to other activities in education or the labour market.

#### 4.1.1.4. The EQF's contribution to easing the integration of migrants

While certain indirect impacts of the EQF on the integration of migrants were highlighted more generally, such as gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside of the Union, no evidence of direct impacts could be identified. However, the EQF would not be expected to have such direct impacts on the integration of migrants, as it supports the better understanding of qualifications from non-EQF third countries more broadly. The changing landscapes of the economy, migration flows, and the labour market have impacted policies and legislation in many countries, which has had a more significant impact<sup>203</sup>.

### Understanding of the qualifications frameworks and systems of non-EQF third countries

To assess the extent to which the EQF and its related activities have contributed to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems from non-EQF third countries, it is important to consider how the EQF has developed cross-links with other national/regional qualifications frameworks, and how understanding of the content of qualifications has increased as a result of the EQF and the activities implemented. The evidence presented below provides an overview of EQF-relevant activities (e.g. cooperation projects,

<sup>203</sup> Bohlinger, S. (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

comparison pilots) in this domain, and as indicators, their impact as perceived by consulted stakeholders.

Consultations with international stakeholders<sup>204</sup>, as well as EQF AG reports<sup>205</sup>, highlight the EQF's contribution to gaining a better understanding of the qualifications frameworks and systems of non-EQF third countries. Representatives of UNESCO and ETF who were interviewed indicated that **the EQF is becoming a global standard in many respects, and acts as a role model and catalyst for the development of NQFs and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs)** (e.g. SADC QF and ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRFF)). In this way, the EQF is increasingly contributing to a common language for qualifications frameworks that feature more cross-links and are more easily understood, as non-EQF third countries or regions incorporate similar structures into their own NQFs and RQFs. In general, the research carried out for this study did not find a significant distinction in impacts since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, although provision EC/AG 13 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on procedures for non-EQF third country qualifications was referenced by one ENIC-NARIC as contributing to the global visibility of the EQF and the better understanding of qualifications frameworks from non-EQF third countries. Moreover, international policy instruments such as Association Agreements (e.g. with Georgia<sup>206</sup>) and mobility partnerships (e.g. with Tunisia and Morocco<sup>207</sup>) are viewed by the EQF AG as a useful way to bring qualifications frameworks closer to the EQF, to further increase awareness and knowledge of EQF, build links between the EQF and non-EQF third countries, and support mobility.

EQF activities highlighted in the desk research and in stakeholder interviews, such as **EQF-related projects and comparison pilots, were also thought by some of the interviewed international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF and third country representatives to contribute to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks from non-EQF third countries, mainly through knowledge exchange and the creation of learning opportunities**. The broad reach of some EQF-related projects was thought by one ENIC-NARIC stakeholder to promote the EQF and help to share knowledge and good practice in the development of RQFs such as SHARE<sup>208</sup>, MERIC-Net<sup>209</sup> and RECO Latin<sup>210</sup>). These activities further promote cross-links and similarities between frameworks, while knowledge sharing furthers the understanding of non-EQF third country frameworks and systems. Similarly, opportunities to learn were referenced as an advantageous outcome of EQF-related activities by one ENIC-NARIC stakeholder, who expressed that in the development of the ACQF, activities and events that brought together the EQF and relevant stakeholders (e.g. webinars and information sharing events) led to the valuable exchange of knowledge, experience, and lessons learned. Moreover, out of all the respondents to the survey that were aware of EQF comparison pilots<sup>211</sup>, around half (35 or 57 % of respondents, of which were from 24 public authorities) agreed or strongly agreed that comparison pilots increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications awarded by non-EQF countries. Furthermore, respondents' answers reflected increased transparency and the opportunity to learn from non-EQF third countries.

The survey data also shows that the most relevant non-EQF third countries should be considered for comparison pilots – for example, those with higher levels of workers and learners migrating to the EU. While **some respondents (consisting mostly of public authorities) noted that non-EQF third countries chosen were not interesting, others**

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<sup>204</sup> Representatives from international organisations, ENIC-NARIC, and non-EQF third countries

<sup>205</sup> For example, see: EQF AG 50-5; EQF AG 55-4.

<sup>206</sup> EQF AG 50-5 p.3.

<sup>207</sup> ETF (2020). Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020.

[https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@\\_@display-file/file/ETF\\_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020\\_EN.pdf](https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@_@display-file/file/ETF_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020_EN.pdf)

<sup>208</sup> SHARE (n.d.). European Union Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region. <https://share-asean.eu/>

<sup>209</sup> Uni-med (n.d.). MERIC- Net <https://www.uni-med.net/projects/meric-net/>

<sup>210</sup> RecoLATIN (n.d.). Seminars & Conferences. <https://www.recolatin.eu/conferences/>

<sup>211</sup> Survey results indicate that only 61 out of 111 (55 %) respondents are aware of EQF work on comparison pilots (of which, 42 (69 %) identified themselves as public authorities and mostly from EU countries).

**see added value**, referencing previously conducted comparison pilots in Hong Kong and New Zealand. Activities such as comparison pilots should also consider relevance and contextual factors, such as migration and labour market forces, of chosen countries to maximise their added value. For example, relevant non-EQF third countries should be selected for comparison pilots to improve mobility and integration of dominant migrant populations. While more recent comparison pilots have provided opportunities to continue building cooperation and understanding with non-EQF third countries, it is not possible to assess their efficacy, as reports have either only recently been completed (Ukraine, February 2023), or they are still ongoing (Cape Verde, due to be completed in Summer 2023), or have not yet begun (SADC QF, due to begin in Summer 2023). Nevertheless, the recently completed comparison pilot with Ukraine is of especial relevance due to the large number of displaced Ukrainian people in the EU. The perceptions of stakeholders from non-EQF third countries are that the comparison will greatly facilitate trust and understanding of the Ukrainian qualifications framework, and help to integrate displaced people more easily.

All in all, the EQF (in general) and its related activities contributed to some extent to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems. The evidence gathered suggests that while the EQF and its activities are perceived positively by some stakeholders (e.g. international organisations and ENIC-NARIC representatives) as having led to the visibility of the EQF concept, shared knowledge and a better understanding of the qualifications frameworks of non-EQF third countries, others (stakeholders interviewed as part of the country case studies, including public authorities, education and training providers, and social partners) do not feel the EQF has improved understandings of non-EQF third country qualifications frameworks, or are unaware of developments in the EQF. Moreover, nuances in national contexts can pose limitations on the extent of EQF application, impact and awareness, as was expressed across all stakeholder groups in the case study on non-EQF third countries. For example, established national procedures (e.g. on recognition) can dictate the relevance of the EQF as a tool; alternatively, as might be expected, in countries with less well developed NQFs (or no NQF), the use and awareness of the EQF may be limited. Similarly, the early stage that the most recent comparison pilots have currently reached does not make it possible to evaluate their contributions – although the information gathered from the desk review and the survey suggests that ongoing EQF activities continue to build trust and transparency and to improve understandings of the qualifications frameworks of non-EQF third countries.

## **Understanding and fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the European Union**

To assess the extent to which the EQF and its related activities have contributed to the integration of migrants by allowing a better understanding and fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union, it is important to consider how the EQF has improved procedures for the recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries. The present study focuses on the integration of migrants from non-EQF third countries (countries not included in the EQF), considering in particular the application of the EQF in recognition procedures, and whether the EQF has eased the processing of requests for the recognition of qualifications handled by ENIC-NARIC centres.

**It can be reasonably expected that the EQF would not directly impact the integration of migrants, but rather have a broader and indirect impact on improving the understanding and recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries.** This is reflected in the evidence gathered, with the interviewed international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF and third country representatives suggesting that the 2017 EQF Recommendation – and the EQF in general – has contributed indirectly to a better understanding and fair recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries, but has not contributed directly to the integration of migrants. For example, around half of survey respondents (30 out of 61, or 49 %), mainly consisting of public authorities, agreed or strongly agreed that EQF comparison pilots have improved national procedures in their

country, in relation to the recognition of qualifications and the validation of the skills of migrants from non-EQF countries.

Providing further evidence of the EQF impact on improved recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries, the perceptions of ENIC-NARIC stakeholders show that the **recognition work undertaken at ENIC-NARIC centres relies to some extent on the EQF as a tool, and contributes to the more consistent recognition of qualifications – although, as might be expected, this is most useful when the non-EQF third countries concerned have NQFs or systems sharing similarities with the EQF.** While ENIC-NARIC representatives indicated the beneficial impact of the EQF in supporting recognition processes, stakeholders consulted in the case study (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) felt they had little exposure to EQF developments and could not identify any impact of EQF on the understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications (e.g. in Serbia and Sweden), or perceived it to be too soon to assess the influence of the EQF (e.g. in Spain and Poland) on their national contexts (see Box 12), such as in the establishment of procedures for recognition or in the early stages of NQF development. These findings suggest that **differences between stakeholder types and national contexts impact the extent of awareness of and the relevance and impacts of the EQF in terms of recognition.**

Importantly, distinctions exist between different types of migrants: migrants from high-income countries (HICs) with well-developed qualifications frameworks or systems, and migrants and refugees from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) with less advanced qualifications frameworks or systems. **The ability of the EQF to respond to the needs of different migrant groups can be challenged by the operational stage or advancement of the qualifications system in the country from which they have come.** For example, among foreign-born residents (non-EU) in the EU, migrants from Singapore, Australia and New Zealand are most prevalent – the majority of whom hold permits issued for family or work reasons<sup>212</sup>. All of these countries have links between their NQFs/RQFs and the EQF (having completed comparison pilots (New Zealand, Australia) or having levels corresponding with those of the EQF (as in the case of AQRIF (including Singapore) which was designed with heavy input from EQF)), making qualification recognition a simpler process that can be well supported by the EQF. Meanwhile, among refugees in the EU, first-time asylum applicants in 2021 mostly came from Asia, the Middle East and Africa – notably, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Türkiye and Bangladesh<sup>213</sup> – all countries which, with the exception of Türkiye, have limited (if any) formal links to the EQF, thus limiting the extent to which the EQF can facilitate the recognition of their qualifications.

As a tool to support recognition, the EQF was also recognised by a representative from Ukraine, who noted the EQF's potential to support the integration of displaced Ukrainian persons (now and in the future) by easing the recognition of qualifications, hence avoiding the risk of overqualification and the need for displaced people to retrain. However, as yet there is no evidence to support this view. Indeed, underlying challenges such as language barriers and strict entry requirements for regulated professions have been identified as contributing to the overqualification of displaced persons from Ukraine in Poland<sup>214</sup>. Desk research also suggests that recognition is more widely accessible for, or targeted towards, higher skilled or qualified people<sup>215</sup>, and excludes those with lower-level qualifications, thus contributing to overqualification among some groups. Furthermore, many migrants and displaced persons face difficulties in accessing such procedures – for example, due to

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<sup>212</sup> European Commission (2021). Statistics on migration to Europe. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en#overall-figures-of-immigrants-in-european-society](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en#overall-figures-of-immigrants-in-european-society)

<sup>213</sup> European Commission (2021). Statistics on migration to Europe. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en#overall-figures-of-immigrants-in-european-society](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en#overall-figures-of-immigrants-in-european-society)

<sup>214</sup> Pędziwiatr, K., Brzozowski, J., & Nahorniuk, O. (2022). Refugees from Ukraine in Kraków. *Centre for Advanced Studies of Population and Religion Cracow University of Economics*.

<sup>215</sup> Murphy, I. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update. Thematic report: Validation of non-formal and informal learning for migrants and refugees.

language barriers<sup>216</sup>. This example points to the relevance of the EQF in supporting recognition and the need to continue building formal links with the NQFs of non-EQF third countries, as well as to continue the development of a global taxonomy of qualifications to better support the integration of migrants and refugees.

**Box 12. Examples of the role of the EQF in contributing in practice to a better understanding and fair recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries**

**Germany:** according to the case study findings, the EQF is considered to be a transparency instrument/tool, providing an initial framework for comparison, to support national legislation and policies on recognition. The key legislation in Germany in relation to recognition includes the Skilled Immigration Act for qualified professionals, the FEG (*Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz*), and the Recognition Act (*Anerkennungsgesetz*), which regulates and implements the assessment procedures for foreign qualifications – for example, in the case of unregulated professions, where an employer might require proof of a formal qualification.

**Sweden:** the ENIC-NARIC centre in Sweden was specifically highlighted as playing a key role in the recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries. This centre makes use of the EQF in order to compare NQF and EQF levels, as well as in facilitating recognition in cases where physical documentation is unavailable<sup>217</sup>. This contributes actively to improved transparency and the easing of recognition and, indirectly, migrant integration. Through its Qualifications Assessment Tool<sup>218</sup>, the ENIC-NARIC centre at the Swedish Council for Higher Education makes available online printable comparisons between qualification levels from various non-EQF third countries, which can be used directly in applications for employment.

**Poland:** national stakeholder (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) regarded it as too early to assess the influence of the EQF and NQF on relationships with qualifications frameworks from outside the EU. However, it was noted that a lack of clarity in the comprehension of qualifications from non-EQF third countries stems from the detachment of NQFs from the reality faced by recruiters, as well as migrants and jobseekers. It was suggested that qualifications frameworks are either not known or not deemed relevant to these groups. A lack of language skills, such as in Polish or English, is considered a high barrier to overcome, alongside a lack of credentials that has contributed to the overqualification of migrants – issues which are not prioritised at national level.

Moreover, challenges were identified that limit the EQF's contributions to supporting the integration of migrants. These included **perceptions among national-level public authorities that the EQF could demonstrate its relevance more effectively to end beneficiaries**, such as employers, who, according to some stakeholders (including an interviewed ENIC-NARIC representative and a country case study national expert) **do not trust qualifications from some countries outside the Union**. This issue is even greater in the case of qualifications from non-EQF third countries that have no formal links between their NQF and the EQF. This suggests that there is much room for the development of improved links between the qualifications frameworks of non-EQF third countries and EQF countries' NQFs which could, through engagement with the EQF, increase trust on the part of beneficiaries. Moreover, two stakeholders from European and international level organisations who were interviewed indicated that other tools such as ESCO are more impactful in creating a common language of skills, and that the **role of the EQF should be considered within the context of the other EU tools available**, to ensure the EQF's usability and relevance – a view that was also expressed by stakeholders consulted during the validation workshop undertaken as part of this study. Lastly, the contribution of the EQF to supporting the integration of migrants may be limited by national policies and the national context of recognition procedures. Desk research shows that indicators of increased

<sup>216</sup> Windisch, H.C., (2020). The relation between refugees' arrival in 2015-2016 and skills recognition at the European level and in Germany. p.4. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/windisch\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/windisch_bwpat39.pdf).

<sup>217</sup> Swedish Council for Higher Education. Background paper. <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/before-you-apply/i-want-to-apply/background-paper/>.

<sup>218</sup> Swedish Council for Higher Education. Qualifications Assessment Tool. <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/qualifications-assessment-tool/armenia/magistr-6045>

migrant integration into labour markets, such as the overqualification of migrants (which remains higher than for EU citizens<sup>219</sup>), are more likely to be impacted by national policies and legislation that reinforces recognition practices, or by economic forces or forces in the labour market that directly impact policies or hiring practices<sup>220</sup>. This is supported by the case study findings (e.g. in Germany, Poland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden).

Overall, the EQF (in general) and its related activities contribute to some extent to the better understanding and fair recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries, with considerable potential to achieve more. It does so as a supporting tool used in broader processes and in national contexts – for example, through the use of the EQF in recognition processes undertaken by ENIC-NARIC. Given its supporting role, the present study finds no evidence that the EQF directly supports the integration of migrants. Importantly, a lack of formal ties, or of understanding or knowledge between non-EQF third countries and the EQF limits the extent to which qualifications are recognised, as well as limiting trust on the part of employers. The evidence also shows that the impact of the EQF in this regard depends on the existence of formal ties, trust from employers, and improved knowledge and understanding of qualifications from non-EQF third countries.

## International cooperation

To assess whether the EQF has contributed to increased cooperation with non-EQF third countries and international stakeholders, the present study considers the perceptions of stakeholders gathered during interviews as well as through the results of the survey, in addition to desk research.

**Based on evidence from EQF AG reports and perceptions of stakeholders consulted, the EQF continues to contribute to international cooperation in a similar manner and to the same extent as it did prior to 2017.** For example, the survey indicated that EQF activities (ongoing comparison pilots) had a positive impact on improved cooperation in relation to qualifications from non-EQF countries (36 out of 61, or 59 % of respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) agreed with this statement). This was further supported by one ENIC-NARIC representative, who indicated that provision EC/AG 13 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on procedures for qualifications from non-EQF third countries signalled the intent to increase international cooperation, and that NQFs or systems have been developed in non-EQF third countries that align with the EQF in order to facilitate mobility (e.g. in Lebanon). The evidence further supports that **such increased international engagement is a reflection of continued EQF activities**, ongoing since before 2017, and with similar beneficial impacts to the comparison pilots.<sup>221</sup> EQF AG notes further illustrate the role that the EQF and its activities can play in fostering international cooperation, describing increased requests to be included in EQF activities from third (non-EQF) countries<sup>222</sup>, as well as from the United Arab Emirates, India and Bangladesh<sup>223</sup>.

According to the perceptions of consulted stakeholders, **ongoing EQF-related activities continue to promote and raise awareness of the EQF and to encourage opportunities for engagement with relevant stakeholders.** In particular, as more countries develop NQFs or RQFs, or as other qualification agencies are opened, more interest is expressed in cooperating with similar organisations, such as the EQF. An example of recent enhanced cooperation can be seen in Africa, where change has been driven, and the ACQF has been developed. Moreover, stakeholders at national, EU and international levels also perceive that additional work should be done to strengthen international engagement and awareness, to share best practices and build a more visible set of activities with non-EQF

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<sup>219</sup> Eurostat (2021). Migration integration statistics -over-qualification. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_over-qualification#cite\\_note-1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_over-qualification#cite_note-1)

<sup>220</sup> Bohlinger, S. (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

<sup>221</sup> EQF AG 55-4

<sup>222</sup> EQF AG 50, minutes

<sup>223</sup> EQF AG 48-3

third countries in order to enhance cooperation – for example, through additional conferences and projects with non-EQF third countries.

In conclusion, desk research and stakeholder perceptions show that since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the EQF and its activities have continued to contribute to cooperation with non-EQF third countries and international stakeholders in the same manner as it did prior to 2017. EQF activities since 2017 (such as in relation to the development of the ACQF, the project group on cooperation with non-EQF third countries, as well as planned and ongoing comparison pilots) continue to develop international ties in more established ways (learning from previous EQF work such as comparison pilots). In the view of the interviewed international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF and third country representatives, further engagement with non-EQF third countries is necessary to raise the visibility of the EQF.

#### 4.1.2. Efficiency

This subsection of the report focuses on answering the evaluation questions relating to efficiency. The first part focuses on the costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, while the second part focuses on efficiency of the work of the EQF AG and NCPs.

##### 4.1.2.1. Costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

The **benefits of referencing qualifications systems to the EQF are valued by consulted EQF AG members and NCPs and, in their opinion, outweigh the relatively limited costs** of doing so. This view is confirmed by reviewing the costs linked to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation against its broader benefits. Consulted EQF AG members and NCPs confirmed this in the survey, in which only 5 out of 63 respondents (8 % of respondents who provided an answer) felt that the costs of developing and applying procedures for allocating NQF/EQF levels to qualifications outweighed the benefits. Such benefits of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot be expressed in financial terms, but can instead be seen in terms of increased understanding of qualifications systems across Europe as well as the increased trust achieved through working together, exchanging views and experiences and reviewing (updates to) the referencing of qualifications systems to the EQF (see also subsection 4.1.1). Related costs that are reviewed in this section are those relating to the implementation of specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at national level (setting up qualification registers, linking the levels of the EQF/NQF to all qualifications in these registers, and conducting communication and outreach activities), as well as each country's participation in the AG. At European level, such costs cover the provision of expertise by the European Commission, Cedefop and the ETF, as well as the coordination of the AG's work and the running of its meetings. A review of the costs of such activities at European level shows that these have been relatively limited.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation encouraged Member States to undertake certain activities at national level, while another set of recommendation calls upon the European Commission, members of the AG and other stakeholders to take action, which creates different types of costs.

#### Identifying costs related to the implementation of the EQF at national level

Starting with the costs related to implementation incurred at the national level, it is important to distinguish between those costs relating to qualifications in general, and those that relate

to implementing the specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The broader work of national qualifications authorities, for instance, is undoubtedly of relevance to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but is not necessarily a consequence of it and often cannot be divided according to those costs dedicated only to the NCP. Moreover, costs relating to national decisions, structures and the national operationalisation of the principles of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot always be considered to be linked to the Recommendation itself. Rather than comparing the substantial variations in costs between the various types of bodies that function as NCPs across the EU, the study first attempted to identify the **costs of specific activities related to the EQF** – a crucial prerequisite for the 2017 EQF Recommendation that exists in all EQF countries.

**The costs of specific activities related to maintaining an NCP network are supported by a combination of European and national contributions. These costs are limited in scope, and appear proportionate to the benefit of having such a network.** In its strictest interpretation, one cost that can be identified in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation relates to the Recommendation's provision for Member States to ensure the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCPs. These function as national hubs for all activities related to the EQF/NQF and are generally combined with other tasks of a competent qualifications authority. Their costs are predominantly covered by national sources, but NCPs can submit specific workplans to the European Commission to apply for support for certain activities linked to the EQF implementation. This has typically resulted in grants in the range of EUR 20k-60k per year, per country<sup>224</sup>. These grants need to be complemented by national co-financing of at least 25 %. The case studies show how the national contributions for NCPs have been consistently higher than the minimum foreseen by Erasmus+, because the total costs of NCPs are considerably higher than just those costs for which they can request financial support. A large majority of NCP and EQF AG members indicated in the survey that the resources available to their organisation are at least somewhat adequate (36 out of 42, or 86 %), which underlines the importance of national contributions in the overall financing of NCP costs. Still, if national and European support is combined, the overall costs related to operating NCP remain relatively limited, particularly when compared with the benefits of having a network of NCPs. For instance, only six NCP and AG members (out of 60 respondents who provided an answer, or 10%) reported that the costs of providing information to national stakeholders considerably outweighed the benefits. Without NCPs, it would not be possible to effectively benefit from the increased potential of transparency and comparability of qualifications created by NQF in relation to the EQF. They serve as a single point of coordination for other national stakeholders in relation to the EQF and bring together all expertise on relevant developments in other EQF countries.

A mapping of further costs reveals that **in many countries most of the recommended actions and solutions were either already ongoing or had been concluded by 2017, which means that the 2017 EQF Recommendation resulted in no additional one-off costs.** Beyond the costs for the NCPs outlined above, additional costs related to implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation can for instance include the referencing of NQFs to the EQF. Similarly, additional activities to bring NQFs closer to individuals and organisations can be considered. Most of these provisions had already been introduced by the 2008 EQF Recommendation (see Chapter 2). Even with regard to the specific functions of NCPs, these can be seen as a "sustaining" or "fine-tuning" of existing developments and actions already taken within the framework of setting up national qualifications frameworks. On this basis, the present study mapped the costs for the main tasks flowing from the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and compared these against qualitative insights on its benefits.

- First, efforts relating to the (updated) referencing of NQFs to the EQF were explored. While most countries had concluded referencing prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the requirement for updating would in theory still be relevant to

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<sup>224</sup> European Commission (2018), Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, title 3.40.



them (see subsection 3.1.2). Since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, referencing has been conducted by Romania (2018), Serbia (2020) and Albania (2021), and updates were submitted by France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands and the UK (Scotland, Wales, England/Northern Ireland). **While an exact estimate of the costs of these cannot be given, interviews with representatives of NCPs underline that the costs of referencing are substantial.** The process requires the extensive involvement of national qualifications authorities, as well as broader stakeholders and (international) experts to reflect on the report. After presenting a first draft to the AG, various rounds of comments usually take place, after which the referencing report is further revised by the national representatives. The extensive work that surrounds referencing has the benefit of increasing the quality of the report, and as such contributes to the transparency of the process at European level. Stakeholders involved in these exercises find that these benefits outweigh the costs related to this process.

- Second, **the recommendations for Member States in relation to common provisions regarding quality assurance and credit systems did not, in essence, create any costs by themselves** (see the discussion in Section 3.3).
- Third, **the provision of information and communication on matters relating to NQFs and the EQF creates another set of costs.** Here too, variation between national approaches is wide, and no uniform approach can be identified across all EQF countries. A common thread among most countries that was initiated by the 2017 EQF Recommendation relates to the development and maintaining of national qualifications registers, which specify the links to the NQF/EQF. National qualifications databases that provide insights into NQF/EQF levels offer insights into all individual qualifications that can be obtained within a country. The result is a significant increase in the transparency and comparability of national qualifications systems, which can – in theory – benefits a wide range of users: participants in education at all levels of the system, employees, employers, educational institutions, expert panels, guidance counsellors and others (see subsection 4.1.1.1 for a more detailed discussion on this particular benefit). This offers sufficient justification for the study to find that these substantial benefits outweigh their costs. Beyond national borders, these registers also allow comparisons with other European qualifications in similar registers, and are being connected on the Europass platform (currently for 17 countries – see Section 3.4). This opens up the corresponding gains in transparency and comparability to an even broader range of users.

In addition, a variety of other types of costs may be relevant in specific countries, depending on the approach chosen. **Such costs may relate to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation** but vary substantially between individual Member States. Such variation can be understood against the various stages of implementation, different qualifications contexts, and the range of interpretation as to what activities fall within the relatively broad framework of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and which activities constitute a purely nationally inspired initiative to increase the comparability of qualifications. For this reason, no specific financial value can be attributed to these costs either. **Consulted stakeholders** (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) **do, however, agree that overall, the costs relating to national implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are limited and are outweighed against the benefits.** For instance, the 13 countries whose NQFs are open to qualifications from outside formal education have introduced procedures to include such qualifications, which tend to present **costs for the providers of such qualifications.** Case studies were conducted in a selection of these countries to map their approaches. These showed that some form of fee-based revenue system was introduced, whereby qualifications authorities charge (private) providers to cover the administrative costs of applying for the inclusion of individual qualifications into NQFs. This cost cannot be linked directly to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but is nonetheless relevant to consider from the perspective of

stakeholders, who also assess the EQF and NQF in the light of such experiences. Case studies found that these costs were relatively limited overall (generally between EUR 1,000 and EUR 4,000). However, such costs, while limited, are generally not incurred by providers of formal qualifications, which tended to be included in the NQF at the time it was established. Even so, this procedure benefits providers of qualifications from outside the formal domain, as it offers the opportunity to gain additional visibility, or even some sort of seal of approval (not to be misconstrued as formal accreditation). The case studies confirm that the costs required to accrue such benefits did not limit the scope of those qualifications submitted to national authorities. For labour market stakeholders and other end beneficiaries, this process represents an additional quality assurance mechanism and an independent level indication<sup>225</sup> that would not have been in place without the NQF.

## Identifying the costs of implementing the EQF at EU level

**On average, the European Commission has roughly EUR 2 million available annually to support EU activities with regard to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.** This is further supported by an estimated 1 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) in annual staff time from European Commission officials<sup>226</sup>. These estimates are based on the earmarked investments in Erasmus+. Erasmus+ is the key EU-level fund that supports activities for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Given its important role, the contribution of Erasmus+ helps in approximating some of the costs at European level. Table 11 below summarises those investments allocated to budget headings in Erasmus+ that can be related to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

**Table 11. Erasmus+ investments (2014-2020)/(2021-2027) allocated to the implementation of the EQF, in million EUR**

(x EYR 1,000,000)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Key Action 2: online tools and services for skills and qualifications – focused on EQF	0.04	0.07	0.1			0.21
Key Action 2: Europass platform and related tools – EQF-related				0.34	0.1	0.44
Key Action 3: transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications – EQF-related	0.65	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1.65
Key Action 3: support for NCPs <sup>227</sup>	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.42	1.42	7.34
<b>Total per year</b>	<b>2.19</b>	<b>1.82</b>	<b>1.85</b>	<b>2.01</b>	<b>1.77</b>	<b>9.64</b>
<b>Staff</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>	<b>1 FTE</b>

Source: compiled by the authors, based on Erasmus+ Annual Work Programme 2018-2022 and more specific estimates provided by the European Commission.

In **Key Action 2**, Erasmus+ supports cooperation among organisations and institutions. Within the scope of the EQF, Erasmus+ supports the development of online tools, services and information covering qualifications. The most relevant of these from the perspective of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is the interconnection of national databases for qualifications with other European tools. Erasmus+ had already supported NCPs with project funds in 2016, and through Key Action 2 has offered additional follow-up support, strengthening the implementation of this specific area of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

<sup>225</sup> See, for example, the Netherlands NIDAP Research (2019). B2B NLQF Overzicht Leven Lang Leren markt Nederland Gebruik NLQF/EQF bij bedrijven en instellingen, p. 11.

<sup>226</sup> The FTE estimate is provided by the European Commission.

<sup>227</sup> This funding is allocated for three-year periods (for 2018-2020 in the 2018 report - WPI: 3.40, split out in Table 18) and 2021-2023 in the 2021 report (WPI: 3.12, split out in Table 16). The table in the present report distributes these values proportionally to all years.

**Key Action 3** in Erasmus+ supports policy development and cooperation. In relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the following two areas of work can be identified.

- Under the heading of transparency and the recognition of skills and qualifications, part of the Erasmus+ investments support a broad range of activities supporting the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, with a particular focus on communication, including the EQF Conference in 2018, the organisation of PLAs, and the running of the EQF AG meetings.
- Erasmus+ offers direct financial support to all NCPs for the EQF that submit a proposal. These budgets are made directly available to NCPs every three years. They amount in total to roughly EUR 1.5 million per year, and are capped at 75 % co-financing; this means that countries need to finance at least 25 % of these costs themselves.

**Cedefop also plays a key role in the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at EU level.** The detailed reports for AG meetings show the active support provided by Cedefop to other stakeholders in the AG, as well as to individual Member States in the years since 2017. The agency offers support for the organisation of AG meetings, provides technical inputs into the preparation of and during AG meetings, as well as contributing to the development of EQF guidance material. Together with the European Commission, Cedefop also supported the organisation of peer-learning events in the context of the AG. Table 12 below summarises the overall estimated yearly costs for these activities in terms of FTE staff and disbursements. The increased costs for 2021 and 2022 relate to additional studies conducted in support of its work, including the data collection conducted every two years to update its inventory of NQF developments.

**Table 12. Costs incurred by Cedefop for EQF-related work**

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Staff</b>	2.75 FTE	2.75 FTE	3.65 FTE	4 FTE
<b>Costs reserved (in million EUR)</b>	0.01	0.02	0.31	0.35

Source: Cedefop, programming documents 2019-2021, 2020-2022, 2021-2023, 2022-2024.

Like Cedefop, the **ETF also provides expertise to the AG**, but with a focus on those EQF countries outside the EU. In the most recent assessment of its work on qualifications, an estimated five staff members (part-time, no FTE estimate available) were working in the field of qualifications with partner countries. This estimate does not explicitly distinguish between support for the AG and support directly to partner countries. Based on the evaluation of its work on qualifications for the period 2014-2019, the support to partner countries can be estimated to represent the larger share<sup>228</sup>.

All in all, the estimates of costs for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation show that the cost of activities at European level are limited, compared with both the costs of other spending programmes and in absolute terms. Consulted stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) are positive about the balance between costs and benefits. Furthermore, when reviewing costs against the potential benefits of increased cooperation on qualifications (outlined in the introduction to this section), these costs are found to be outweighed by the broader benefits.

<sup>228</sup> 3s / Ockham IPS (2020). [Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries 2014-2019](#).

#### 4.1.2.2. Efficiency of the work of the EQF Advisory Group, NCPs, Cedefop and the ETF

Implementation of the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation builds on the existing governance structures (for more details on these, see subsection 2.3.5). The specific actions implemented by EQF AG and NCPs relate to the thematic headings discussed in the previous subsection (4.1.1); thus, these actions are discussed in further detail there. This section, meanwhile, focuses on the efficiency of the work of EQF AG, NCPs, Cedefop and the ETF.

##### Efficiency of the EQF AG's work

This section considers whether the working methods of the EQF AG – namely, EQF AG plenary meetings, project groups and PLAs – operated smoothly and without interruptions, and if they are perceived well by the EQF AG members<sup>229</sup>. Each of the working methods listed above is analysed separately below. The present study also considers whether the EQF AG involves all of the relevant stakeholders, and if EQF AG working methods were adapted well during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section is mostly based on the analysis of EQF AG notes and interviews with selected EQF AG members and NCPs.

Before considering efficiency, the study reviewed the agendas of EQF AG meetings to assess the prioritisation of topics during EQF AG meetings between 2017 and -2022<sup>230</sup>. While the agendas of such meetings are proposed by the European Commission, the contents of these agendas offer clear insights into the types of issues discussed by the AG, as well as the time allocated to various provisions. **The largest individual share of time in EQF AG meetings was dedicated to referencing and re-referencing** (a total of 17 %), with six<sup>231</sup> country referencing reports and six<sup>232</sup> referencing update reports being discussed and accepted since 2017. When looking at the results presented in Figure 4 below, it must be noted that out of the EQF AG meetings during 2017-2022, two EQF AG meetings were joint meetings: one with the Europass AG, and one with the ESCO Member States Working Group.

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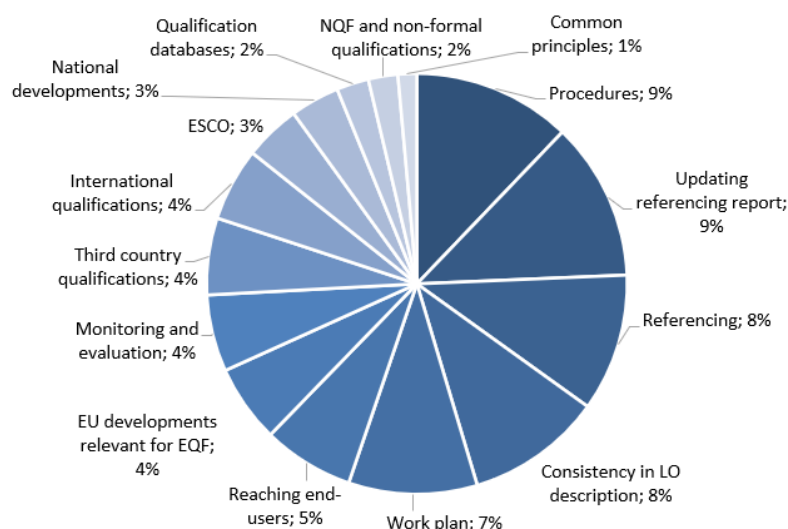
<sup>229</sup> EQF AG members were the only stakeholders asked to assess the EQF AG's working methods; other stakeholders were not consulted on this. This is because they are the only stakeholders who have direct experience of using these working methods, and thus no one else can better explain what works and what does not.

<sup>230</sup> All agenda items for EQF AG meetings during the 2017-2022 period were categorised and corrected for double entries (sometimes, an item was put on the agenda but in practice moved to the next section; in case of such double entries, only one was kept). The amount of time dedicated to each categorised item on the agenda was aggregated over time.

<sup>231</sup> The referencing reports of Romania in 2018, and of Serbia and Albania in 2020 and 2021, respectively, were accepted. The referencing reports for the German-speaking Community in Belgium and for Spain, as well as for Bosnia and Herzegovina, were still pending and had not been finalised at the time of this evaluation.

<sup>232</sup> Five current EQF countries (FR, IE, IT, LV, NL), and all qualifications frameworks in the UK.

**Figure 4. Priorities of the EQF AG 2017-2022, as a percentage of time in AG plenary meetings**



Source: authors' own elaboration, based on an analysis of EQF AG meeting agendas, 2017-2022.

All six EQF AG members who were interviewed agreed that **EQF AG plenary meetings allow EQF AG members to discuss issues relating to the implementation of EQF** (e.g. EQF guidance notes, learning outcomes, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the non-EQF third country dimension, common communication strategy, relevant policy developments at EU and national levels, referencing, relevant studies, projects, and events). In addition, they agreed that the EQF AG **creates networking and knowledge sharing opportunities** between countries and stakeholders. The **presentation of referencing reports and reviews to the EQF AG was highlighted as an especially valuable tool**, as it allows EQF AG members to benefit from experience and lessons learned in other countries, and increases the mutual understanding of qualifications systems among EQF countries. These results are in line with the online survey on the EQF AG work plan 2022-2023<sup>233</sup> in which the largest share of respondents was satisfied with EQF AG plenary meetings (see Figure 5 below). This may be related to the fact that all EQF AG members participate in EQF AG meetings, while not all of them are part of other working methods (PLAs, project groups), and as a result, fewer respondents could assess their satisfaction with these other working methods. Despite evaluating the EQF AG plenary meetings positively overall, the following challenges were mentioned by stakeholders:

- **EQF AG plenary meetings were considered not interactive enough<sup>234</sup>.** Having more time for discussions in the plenary could lead to greater engagement and better decision-making. To enable this, the agenda for the meetings could be made less heavy, and more time could be given to discussions on relevant issues.
- **Insufficient time to get acquainted with EQF AG documents.** Although this situation has improved in recent years (the documents are shared earlier, and have become shorter and easier to read), having more time to get acquainted with EQF AG documents would enable AG members to better prepare for the meetings and be more active in them.
- **Changes of country representatives raise challenges** for the new representatives to actively participate in EQF AG activities. This is related to the fact

<sup>233</sup> EQF AG 58, 2022 February.

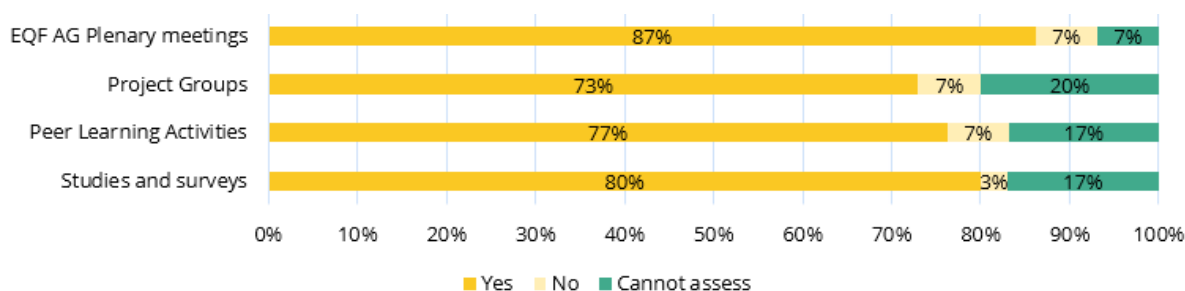
<sup>234</sup> This finding was also supported by workshop participants.

that new members are not yet familiar with the dynamics of the group, and do not yet have personal contact with the rest of the group.

The EQF AG members who were interviewed were satisfied that such working methods as **PLAs** exist, as they **give EQF AG members an opportunity to deepen their knowledge** about some of the issues linked to EQF implementation and to **discuss them in more detail**. These results are in line with the online survey on the EQF AG work plan 2022-2023<sup>235</sup>, in which 77 % of respondents were satisfied with PLAs as a working method. In addition, the 2013 European Commission evaluation<sup>236</sup> concluded that PLAs are a useful tool allowing the exchange of information on different policy options, as well as experience on practical questions, and for providing insight into practices in other countries. Despite an overall good evaluation of PLAs, some stakeholders indicated that the **results from PLAs could be better followed up during plenary meetings**. This could ensure better synergies between the different working methods.

The EQF AG members who were interviewed noted that **EQF project groups** were very useful, as they **give EQF AG members an opportunity to discuss issues related to the EQF implementation in more detail** than is possible during EQF AG plenary meetings. These results are in line with the online survey on the EQF AG work plan 2022-2023<sup>237</sup>, in which 73 % of respondents were satisfied with project groups as a working method. Despite an overall good assessment of project groups, **challenges were identified in relation to follow-up during plenary sessions on the results of project groups**. Aside from this, interviewees offered no further feedback or suggestions to improve project groups or in the selection of their topics.

**Figure 5. Are you satisfied with the established working methods of EQF AG?**



Note: N=30.

Source: EQF AG 58 Survey results — EQF AG Work Plan.

The evidence gathered suggests that the **current composition and representation of stakeholders in the EQF AG are balanced** (a large majority of EQF AG members and NCPs interviewed supported this conclusion). Some interviewees suggested that the involvement of organisations and people working with specific topics relevant to the EQF could be useful – e.g. ENIC-NARIC, UNESCO, Europass AG (this group already participated in some joint meetings with EQF AG) – when specific topics that relate to the work of these organisations or groups are discussed during AG meetings. This could take place in the form of joint meetings between the EQF AG and representatives of the other practitioners or expert groups. The joint meetings previously held were considered useful for sharing information and experiences, as well as for discussing issues that are closely related and coordinating efforts.

When assessing the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the work of the EQF AG, it can be concluded that **EQF AG managed to adapt** to a large extent. EQF AG plenary meetings were moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic (from the 53<sup>rd</sup> meeting in June 2020 to 58<sup>th</sup> meeting in February 2022). Although online meetings allow traveling time and money

<sup>235</sup> EQF AG 58, 2022 February.

<sup>236</sup> ICF (2013), Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, p. vi.

<sup>237</sup> EQF AG 58, 2022 February.

to be saved, as well as being more environmentally friendly and easier to attend, interviewees for the present study, as well as the EQF AG member survey on the EQF AG work plan 2022-2023<sup>238</sup>, both **highlighted the importance of having face-to-face meetings at least once a year**. The majority of EQF AG members interviewed noted difference in the dynamics of online meetings compared with those held on-site:

- Discussions and interactions during online meetings were not as active as during on-site meetings. Online meetings represented an exchange of viewpoints from different stakeholders rather than discussions. The engagement and cooperation in such meetings were also more limited (especially for new EQF AG members who had not previously met the rest of the group in person), for example, due to a lack of non-verbal cues that can make it harder to understand other participants.
- Online meetings do not provide opportunities for informal conversations. This makes it more difficult to build relationships with other group members. These relationships could be relevant for the future work at national level (e.g. one interviewee mentioned that after exchanging information during EQF AG meeting breaks, they had invited some EQF AG members to a conference to share their experiences).
- People's attention is more focused and they have fewer distractions during on-site meetings.

Although the EQF AG adapted by moving plenary meetings online, **the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the organisation of PLAs**. The PLA on communication was delayed until the autumn of 2022, while the PLA on international qualifications was delayed to 2023.

All in all, the evidence gathered suggests that the working methods of the EQF AG operate smoothly and without interruptions, that they contribute to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and that they are perceived well by the EQF AG's members. In addition, its working methods are constantly improving<sup>239</sup>. The composition and representation of stakeholders in the EQF AG were found to be balanced. Lastly, the EQF AG managed to adapt to COVID-19 pandemic to a large extent by moving plenary meetings online and delaying two PLAs.

## Efficiency of Cedefop and the ETF

Cedefop and ETF support the implementation of the EQF. Cedefop does so by providing guidance and supporting countries involved in EQF in the process of linking their national qualifications to the EQF. In addition, it promotes the use of the EQF as a tool for the recognition of qualifications by raising awareness among stakeholders, and providing information and resources on how to use the EQF. Cedefop also supports the Commission in the implementation of the EQF with its technical expertise. Meanwhile, the ETF supports and provides guidance on aligning the national qualifications systems of EU neighbour countries with the EQF. In addition, it promotes the transparency and comparability of qualifications in the EU and neighbouring countries – including countries involved in the EQF process (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) as well as other neighbouring countries such as Ukraine. This includes helping countries to develop and implement NQFs that are compatible with the EQF, and promoting the recognition of qualifications across borders. The relevant work of Cedefop and the ETF work is presented in more detail in Table 13.

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<sup>238</sup> EQF AG 58, 2022 February.

<sup>239</sup> The issue that the 2017 EQF Recommendation are addressed to the EU MS, but also cover some non-EU countries was never mentioned as a challenge in interviews, and did not appear anywhere in the evidence collected. Hence, the study can conclude that this is not an issue.

**Table 13. Main areas of the work of Cedefop and the ETF**

Cedefop	ETF
Issues publications to provide conceptual and empirical support in EQF/NQF-related debates (e.g. learning outcomes; comparison of qualifications)	Issues publications to provide empirical support in EQF/NQF-related debates (e.g. learning outcomes; comparison of qualifications; country specific developments)
Provides support and technical assistance in (re-)referencing processes and discussions	Provides policy advice on the development and implementation of NQFs that align with the EQF
Has implemented regular monitoring of NQFs since 2008-2009. through the European inventory of NQFs	Compares qualifications between countries
Clarifies conceptual issues regarding the EQF	
Organises and participates in events, seminars, conferences to support EQF/NQF related debates	
Participates and provides conceptual input (incl. preparation of background documents and meeting notes) to EQF AG meetings, PLAs, and project groups	
	Organises capacity-building among public authorities
	Supports the planning/preparation and monitors the implementation of EU-funded projects

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on EQF AG documents, 2017 and 2008 EQF Recommendations, and the Cedefop and ETF websites.

The evidence gathered suggests that **the work of Cedefop and the ETF in relation to EQF implementation is perceived well by stakeholders** (mainly consisting of public authorities (including EQF AG members and NCPs) and international qualifications experts), and that **Cedefop and the ETF support and contribute to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation**. The 'Evaluation of the EU Agencies under the remit of DG EMPL: EUROFOUND, Cedefop, ETF and EU-OSHA'<sup>240</sup>, carried out in 2018 (an evaluation of the agencies covering the period 2017-2022 is currently underway) concluded that as a major centre of expertise on qualifications, **Cedefop heavily supported the process of EQF implementation and the development of NQFs**. In addition, this evaluation and the 'Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries'<sup>241</sup> concluded that the **ETF's contribution to developments in partner countries in the domain of qualifications and qualifications systems was especially strong**. This is supported by both the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities) and interview (EQF AG members, NCPs and international qualifications experts) respondents, who were positive about the work of Cedefop and the ETF in relation to the EQF: around 67<sup>242</sup> out of 102 respondents (66 %) assessed Cedefop's work as somewhat useful, quite useful or indispensable to progress in implementing the EQF. It must be noted that around 32<sup>243</sup> out of 102 respondents (31 %) reported being unable to assess the work of Cedefop.

<sup>240</sup> PPMI and Ecorys (2018). "Evaluation of the EU Agencies under the remit of DG EMPL: EUROFOUND, CEDEFOP, ETF and EU-OSHA"

<sup>241</sup> Ockham-IPS, 3s, FGB (2020), Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries.

<sup>242</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Publications to provide conceptual and empirical support in EQF/NQF related debates (e.g. learning outcomes; comparison of qualifications) (72 out of 102 or 71 %); Seminal events / conferences to support EQF/NQF related debates (69 out of 102 or 68 %); Clarifying conceptual issues of EQF (70 out of 102 or 69 %); Providing support and technical assistance in (re-) referencing processes and discussions (55 out of 102 or 54 %).

<sup>243</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Publications to provide conceptual and empirical support in EQF/NQF related debates (e.g. learning outcomes; comparison of qualifications) (27 out of 102 or 26 %); Seminal events / conferences to support



This may relate to their limited knowledge of Cedefop's work in relation to EQF. Too few responses (12) concerning the work of ETF were received in the survey to provide any robust findings. In addition, three of the EQF AG members and NCPs interviewed mentioned that the EQF AG documents to which Cedefop and ETF contributes are useful and well prepared, and that events were always a forum for fruitful discussions with a lot of information being provided by the national experts who participate in them. However, while the work of Cedefop and the ETF work was generally rated positively, **survey respondents provided some suggestions for the improvement of their activities:**

- Cedefop could provide short conceptual articles in places other than on the Cedefop portal (e.g. on Europass), and could take a more active role in making its work more easily understandable, so that the results of its work would be better followed up;
- Cedefop's work has historically mostly related to VET. More engagement with HE and employment stakeholders would be useful;
- Both Cedefop and ETF could have more direct contact with a wider range of stakeholders (e.g. through informative and educational seminars), since there is still a lack of understanding about the importance and purpose of the EQF/NQFs to national qualifications systems.

To conclude, Cedefop and the ETF support and contribute to the implementation of the EQF. The efficiency of their work in this area is perceived well by stakeholders, mainly consisting of public authorities (including EQF AG members and NCPs) and international qualifications experts.

## Efficiency of NCPs

NCPs are key actors in the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at national level. The main tasks of the NCPs in the context of EQF implementation are to support national authorities in referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the EQF, ensuring the transparency of referencing and bringing the EQF closer to individuals and organisations (e.g. by promoting and disseminating information, engaging stakeholders).

**All EQF countries already had an NCP in place** prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and still do. A review of the institutional affiliations of NCPs shows that they are often positioned with national qualifications authorities that work not only on the EQF/NQF, but are often in charge of the broader qualifications system within the country. In terms of institutional arrangements, 30<sup>244</sup> NCPs are either departments within a ministry or supervised by a ministry; nine<sup>245</sup> NCPs are independent bodies; while the remaining one<sup>246</sup> is a joint initiative of the federal government and municipal government<sup>247</sup>. **Due to these differing arrangements, NCPs perform a variety of different functions in different Member States.** Hence, no clear overview of NCP tasks and how they are implemented in each country can be provided within the scope of the present study, as this would require extensive analysis of institutional arrangements in each country. Insights from two interviews with NCPs in Austria and Hungary show that **there is a lack of cooperation and sharing of experience between NCPs.** Interviewees noted that it would be useful to meet regularly with other NCPs, to share experiences and build connections. The rest of this section focuses on the opinions of stakeholders, gathered through survey, regarding the role of NCPs in ensuring awareness of and the use of the EQF.

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EQF/NQF related debates (29 out of 102 or 28 %); Clarifying conceptual issues of EQF (28 out of 102 or 27 %); Providing support and technical assistance in (re-) referencing processes and discussions (44 out of 102 or 43 %).

<sup>244</sup> BE [de], BE [nl], BG, HR, CY, EE, FI, EL, HU, LV, MT, PL, ES, DK, FR, LU, SI, LT, PT, RO, SK, SE, BA, MK, AL, LI, ME, NO, RS, TR.

<sup>245</sup> AT, BE[fr], CZ, IT, IE, NL, IC, CH, XK.

<sup>246</sup> DE.

<sup>247</sup> NQF online tool (2020 information): <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/overview>

With regard to the opinions of stakeholders about NCPs, 50 out of 80 survey respondents (63 %), mainly consisting of public authorities, agreed or strongly agreed that the **NCP in their country has taken an active role to ensure awareness and use of the EQF**. This result is similar to the stakeholders' survey carried out in the previous European Commission evaluation on the EQF, carried out in 2013<sup>248</sup>. Here, 60 % of respondents indicated that their NCP had actively informed them about progress with the referencing process. However, around one-third of respondents in the present survey did not know or could not answer as to whether the NCP had taken an active role to ensure awareness and use of the EQF, showing that there is still work to do in promoting and disseminating information and engaging stakeholders. Analysis of the survey shows that end beneficiaries were less likely to know or be able to answer as to whether the NCP had taken an active role to ensure awareness and use of the EQF. This option was selected by 9 out of 19, or 47 %, of end beneficiaries). Dissemination of information to the wider public was also mentioned as a weakness in the 2013 European Commission evaluation<sup>249</sup>, which concluded that the **dissemination of information to stakeholders in the field of education and training was sufficient, but dissemination to the wider public was not**.

The evidence gathered suggests that NCPs are established and that they conduct activities to raise awareness about EQF/NQF in their countries. Dissemination of information for the stakeholders in the field of education and training are sufficient, but dissemination to the wider public could be strengthened. In addition, regular meetings between NCPs at which they could share experiences and good practices might help NCPs to better implement their work.

### 4.1.3. Coherence

This subsection of the report focuses on answering evaluation questions relating to coherence. The first part focuses on internal coherence, while the following part covers external coherence (coherence with other policy initiatives).

#### 4.1.3.1. Internal coherence

**The individual provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as well as the overall responses by EQF countries, are found to be generally coherent with the objectives of the Recommendation.** These objectives can be understood as a continuation from its 2008 predecessor, and seek to increase the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications, as well as facilitating lifelong learning. Thus, the objectives and actions offer continuity, by refining existing provisions, codifying existing practice and introducing a new provision on third-country frameworks (see Chapter 2 for more details). The new and revised provisions in the Recommendation follow logically coherently from the barriers identified in the evaluation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. In the context of the consultations carried out for the present study, different groups of stakeholders did not mention examples in which internal coherence was not ensured.

Below, the internal coherence of the individual provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are reviewed in further detail:

- The underlying theory of change for the EQF (and the original 2008 EQF Recommendation) is that the definition of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes allows them to be positioned transparently within a national qualifications system or framework and subsequently, to be linked to EQF levels, based on level descriptors (milestone 1 from the 2008 EQF Recommendation). Once this is complete, the next step is to ensure that such levels are also made visible on

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<sup>248</sup> ICF (2013), Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, p. vi.

<sup>249</sup> ICF (2013), Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, p. vi.

qualification documents or in registers (milestone 2 from the 2008 EQF Recommendation). The introduction in the 2017 EQF Recommendation of common data fields for use in qualification registers allows such registers to be interlinked and for their contents to be compared. This operationalisation of matching logic is thereby found fully coherent with the objectives of the Recommendation.

- The introduction of the organisation of regular updates to NQF referencing further helps to strengthen trust in the referencing process. As such, it is coherent with the previously established referencing process.
- The 2017 EQF Recommendation states its objective of better linking formal, non-formal and informal learning, but is not explicit as to how this is to be achieved; however, it leaves multiple implicit pathways to work towards this objective in a coherent way. The EQF is designed to serve as a framework for all qualifications in NQFs that are described in terms of learning outcomes, regardless of whether or not these are provided within the formal domain. This ensures that the EQF can link qualifications from different domains in the formal education sector and beyond. Where MS do not include all (types of) qualifications in their NQFs, the Recommendation's call to integrate arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning further helps to ensure such links. The priorities and actual work undertaken by the EQF AG during the period 2017-2022 offer a more explicit operationalisation; the AG engaged MS in discussions on how to include qualifications outside formal education and training into qualifications systems. This focus appears primarily informed by an informal working assumption that 'including qualifications outside formal education and training in NQF can increase the transparency and recognition of and the trust in these qualifications at both national and European levels'<sup>250</sup>. This concrete follow-up work also fits coherently within the overarching objective of better linking formal, non-formal and informal learning, even though the Recommendation does not explicitly specify this direction.
- The explicit attention paid to defining a set of common quality assurance principles is fully coherent with the 2017 EQF Recommendation's ambitions to not only strengthen the process of referencing entire qualifications systems to the EQF, but also to offer a minimum level of trust and transparency regarding the qualifications included in those qualifications systems. The 2017 EQF Recommendation further extends this logic to all qualifications in NQFs, not only those in VET or HE, which is coherent in the light of the objective to encourage links between formal and non-formal learning.
- The same logic applies to the attention given to credit systems. By underlining the possible use of credit systems, particularly between different education systems in an NQF, the 2017 EQF Recommendation makes a specific suggestion as to how to facilitate the mobility and learning progression of individual citizens.
- The suggested outreach efforts and target groups are also coherent with the Recommendation's objectives. It refers to social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities as the target groups among which the use of the EQF is to be encouraged. The 2017 EQF Recommendation does not explicitly define end beneficiaries (qualification holders or employers) among its target groups. While a limited number of NCPs interviewed pointed to this as a shortcoming, this is in fact found to be coherent with the way in which the EQF operates in relation to NQFs. It is therefore coherent that the EQF, which carries implications for NQFs, and not directly for individual qualifications, targets those stakeholders that work with the overall qualifications system or

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<sup>250</sup> See for instance EQF AG note 58-4, page 11 about qualifications outside formal education and training.

framework, rather than those whose involvement is limited to individual qualifications.

Taken as a whole, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has a clear ambition to increase the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe and to facilitate lifelong learning. The defined policy actions that are recommended to Member States are coherent with these objectives. It is therefore concluded that there are no internal contradictions when assessing the specific actions suggested in the 2017 EQF Recommendation individually against the relevant objectives, nor when reviewing actions in their entirety against the overall framework of objectives. The broad scope of objectives means that the setting-up of procedures for levelling international qualifications or for developing and applying criteria and procedures to enable the comparison of third countries' national and regional qualifications frameworks are internally coherent with other recommendations, and support the achievement of the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications and the building of trust and understanding with regard to the qualifications systems of other countries.

#### 4.1.3.2. Coherence with other policy initiatives

Beginning at the international level, **the EQF fits coherently into a wider framework of major policy developments on qualifications from an international perspective.** The most relevant of these developments and policies are discussed below, based on the extent to which they make reference to the EQF.

- UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is active in mapping the development of NQFs in education and training in its Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks, developed together with Cedefop and the ETF<sup>251</sup>. The EQF is a central point of comparison and an inspiration for this work, and the actions suggested in the 2017 EQF Recommendation align coherently with such international interest.
- The 2017 EQF Recommendation also aligns with the framework of the Bologna process, which is a voluntary process of coordination among 49 countries and which established a European Higher Education Area. It introduced three cycles with specific level descriptors, with which the EQF level descriptors for levels 5 to 8 are aligned<sup>252</sup>. This operational link is also emphasised in the 2017 EQF Recommendation's recitals, as well as in the common provisions for quality assurance and credit systems and in Annex II on descriptors. While the EQF level descriptors correspond coherently to the EHEA cycle descriptors, it is also important to underline the different functions and objectives of the EQF and EHEA. These differences do not negate the coherence between the two. While the EHEA qualifications framework intends to harmonise systems<sup>253</sup>, the purpose of the EQF (as reaffirmed in the 2017 EQF Recommendation) is to relate systems to each other, in order to serve as translation device that can clarify the relationships between qualifications from different systems (both between and within countries). This also means that EQF levels 5-8 are compatible with the three EHEA cycles, but may link to any type of qualifications awarded through formal, non-formal or informal learning, which is not limited to higher education, and may also, for instance, include vocational qualifications.

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<sup>251</sup> See, for example, Cedefop, ETF, UNESCO, UIS (2019), [Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks 2019](#), Volume I.

<sup>252</sup> See, for example, [General Report](#) to the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education - Bergen 19/20 May 2005.

<sup>253</sup> The recent [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#) (2020), for instance 'recognises that accomplishing [the vision of the EHEA] will require enacting policies and implementing measures in our, national frameworks, some of which will go beyond our higher education systems and will entail alignment of wider national economic, financial and social strategies'.

At the level of the EU, work within the framework of the **2017 EQF Recommendation aligns with the most recent European target of 60 % of adults participating annually in training by 2030, as defined in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan**<sup>254</sup>. Lifelong learning is one of the core objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which can ultimately be judged against progress in increasing the shares of adults participating in learning. Work within the framework of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation focuses on helping to clarify the meaning and value of qualifications within education systems and individual countries, as well as across borders. Ultimately, such efforts are expected to contribute to participation in adult learning by reducing information barriers and uncertainties regarding the value of qualifications. Stakeholders (no significant differences across stakeholder types observed) in the survey and PC carried out for the present study underline the high level of coherence between the 2017 EQF Recommendation and other European initiatives; only six out of 102 survey respondents, and 13 out of 229 PC respondents (5 %) reported some doubts concerning coherence. In addition, more specific legislative instruments at European level were reviewed in terms of their coherence with the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

- The **2005 Directive on recognition of professional qualifications** has some relevance for the EQF<sup>255</sup>. It establishes rules for the recognition of professional qualifications of regulated professions. The **2013 amendment to the Directive on recognition of professional qualifications** underlines the central position the EQF had gained in the meantime (inspired by the 2008 EQF Recommendation), as it introduced the possibility that common training frameworks for nationally regulated professions can be set by the Commission in delegated acts, which could define minimum sets of learning outcomes based on EQF levels<sup>256</sup>. To ensure coherence with the Directive, the 2017 EQF Recommendation explicitly specifies in its pre-ambles point (20) that its provisions to include EQF levels on qualifications has no effect on access to labour markets. This confirms the role of the EQF as a translation device focused on creating transparency and comparability of qualifications, and not as a tool that offers entitlements to recognition, which is fully in line to the objectives of the EQF Recommendation. How the Directive's provision and possible coherence with the EQF would work in practice remains unclear; as yet, no such delegated acts have been adopted.
- The **Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies** (2008)<sup>257</sup> invited Member States to strengthen European cooperation on lifelong guidance provision, in particular through the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN), and to provide citizens and guidance stakeholders with reliable information resources that comprehensively cover Member States' education and training systems and guidance services, in particular via the Euroguidance network. It also explicitly specifies that the EQF, as a common reference framework, should 'facilitate workers' mobility and help make guidance part and parcel of Member States' education and employment policies and practices'. The 2017 EQF Recommendation seeks to achieve this by encouraging the further development of the EQF, which offers a translation of different levels of qualifications from across different education systems (within and across countries), as well as insights at the level of principles regarding guidelines and credit systems that serve as guidelines for those qualifications included in the EQF, as specified in the Recommendation's annexes.

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<sup>254</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, [COM\(2021\)\\_102 final](#).

<sup>255</sup> Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, [OJ L 255](#), 30.9.2005, pp. 22–142.

<sup>256</sup> Directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 amending Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications. [OJ L 354](#), 28.12.2013, pp. 132–170.

<sup>257</sup> Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies, [OJ C 319](#), 13.12.2008, pp. 4-7.

- The **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** (2012)<sup>258</sup> contributed to the Europe 2020 Strategy by allowing greater transparency regarding the skills available in the workforce and in facilitating a better match between skills and labour demand, thus promoting the better transferability of skills across companies or entire sectors and facilitating mobility in the European labour market. The EQF plays a supportive role for the actions in this recommendation; both the original 2008 EQF Recommendation and the 2017 EQF Recommendation define the promotion of common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning as broader objectives of the EQF<sup>259</sup>. The ever-increasing use of learning outcomes-based standards since the adoption of the 2008 EQF Recommendation and the subsequent 2017 EQF Recommendation facilitates such comparison and supports the trend towards more qualifications being obtained through formal, non-formal and informal learning. Further synergies were found, for instance in the evaluation of the Council Recommendation, which points to the work of the EQF AG, which also discusses issues related to the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>260</sup>.
- The **Upskilling Pathways Recommendation** (2016) invites Member States to either develop new approaches to support specific target groups in attaining a qualification and closing gaps in their basic skills or improving key components of their overall adult learning systems to expand the availability of up-skilling pathways, either as a standalone initiative or as part of a broader policy framework. This can be achieved, for example, by increasing the provision of formal adult education, or by expanding the availability of routes for progression based on non-formal adult learning. Alternatively, upskilling pathways can be improved by supporting work-based routes for progression, through the use of incentives for and cooperation with employers to offer upskilling opportunities towards qualifications at EQF levels 3 or 4. The 2017 EQF Recommendation offers a coherent way of doing so, seeking to better link formal, non-formal and informal learning, and supporting the validation towards such qualifications of learning outcomes acquired in different settings<sup>261</sup>.
- The **Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning** (the first one of which was issued in 2006) from 2018 identifies eight key competences required for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. It follows a similar logic to the 2017 EQF Recommendation by structuring competences into the sub-areas, but does so in a different way by defining knowledge, skills and attitudes. This marks a minor difference from the use of 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'autonomy and responsibility' in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but has no practical implications.
- The **Europass Decision** of 2004 and the **revised Europass Decision** on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (2018) are linked coherently to the work conducted as part of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This is reflected, for instance, in the revised Europass Decision's explicit insistence that it refers to the EQF for information on qualifications, descriptions of national education and training systems and other relevant topics.<sup>262</sup> As noted in Section 3.5 of this report, all EQF information is indeed currently available on the Europass portal. Moreover, the data fields for the electronic

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<sup>258</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, [OJ C 398](#), 22.12.2012, p. 1–5

<sup>259</sup> This was for the first time formally defined in Council conclusions on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning defined on 28 May 2004, and now formalised in the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

<sup>260</sup> European Commission (2020), Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>261</sup> Based on preamble 4 of the EQF Recommendation.

<sup>262</sup> Article 4(4) of Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112OJ L 112OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

publication of information on qualifications listed in Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation correspond directly to the provision of information required in Article 3(2) of the 2018 Europass Decision, which is being further operationalised into the European Learning Model. As such, these initiatives are able to coherently build on the content of the 2017 EQF Recommendation – in this case, specifically on its provisions regarding data fields as specified in the Recommendation’s Annex VI. The 2018 Europass Decision further underlines the importance of *all* Europass web tools (not only the EQF) making reference to EQF levels where relevant<sup>263</sup>. This is another way in which the Decision strengthens the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This further underlines the coherence of the EQF Recommendation with Europass.

- The **Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods**<sup>264</sup> (2018) is another step towards establishing a European Education Area. The 2017 EQF Recommendation functions as a key instrument for its implementation, and as such is coherently linked to it. It recommends, for instance, that Member States should reference their national qualifications frameworks or systems to the EQF, and that they should review and update these where relevant to foster transparency and build trust in higher education systems to achieve automatic mutual recognition for the purpose of further learning (Recommendation 2a in the Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition), or facilitate progress towards automatic mutual recognition of upper-secondary education and training qualifications (Recommendation 5a in the Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition). This aligns directly with provision MS2 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which also recommends that Member States should review and update, where relevant, the referencing of the levels of the national qualifications frameworks or systems to the levels of the EQF. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation itself does not offer the means for (automatic) mutual recognition, it facilitates such recognition, functioning as a translation tool that aids communication and comparison between qualifications systems in Europe, which helps learners, graduates, providers and employers to understand and compare qualifications.

The 2020 European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, published on 1 July 2020<sup>265</sup>, forms another set of policy initiatives that works in this direction. The most relevant of its 12 Actions were reviewed in terms of their coherence with the 2017 EQF Recommendation:

- The Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (the **VET Recommendation**) explicitly defines the EQF (among others) as a key transparency tool, which is understood to coherently contribute to its objectives. The VET Recommendation’s target of increasing mobility among VET learners, for instance, depends on having a framework in place that helps to ensure the transparency and comparability of VET programmes. In theory, the learning outcomes approach of the 2017 EQF Recommendation coherently offers the tools and framework necessary to be able to achieve progress on this. Moreover, the VET Recommendation integrates the provisions of quality (EQAVET) and credit systems (ECVET), which align coherently with the principles mentioned in the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

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<sup>263</sup> Article 4(4) of Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

<sup>264</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad ([OJ C 444](#), 10.12.2018, p. 1).

<sup>265</sup> European Commission (2020), [European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#).

- Cooperation within the framework of the **European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications** (ESCO) is coherently linked to the EQF, in view of the specific focus of each instrument, which complement each other. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation focuses on providing transparency and comparability with regard to the supply-side of skills, ESCO focuses on the demand side, providing a common language on occupations and skills on the labour market. Data on the learning outcomes of qualifications can be enriched with links to ESCO skills using the **Learning-Outcomes Linking** tool. This offers a fine-grained approach to skills and occupations, which can be coherently linked to the similarly granular approach embedded in learning outcomes promoted by the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Their combined potential has already been explored in several rounds of pilots, in which the automated linking of the learning outcomes of qualifications with ESCO skills was tested across different languages<sup>266</sup>. While the technical work to optimise this automated linking continues, the existing legal environment coherently supports further work in this area to increase synergies between the two initiatives.
- The **Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials**<sup>267</sup> offers a framework to support the development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials across institutions, businesses, sectors and borders. It links coherently with the efforts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation by inviting Member States to integrate micro-credentials into national qualifications frameworks and systems. When this is done, the provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation also apply to micro-credentials. From this perspective, the recommendation that Member States work on making micro-credentials measurable, comparable and understandable, with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level and the learning offer, further adds to its coherence with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Annex II of the Recommendation on micro-credentials also explicitly refers to the EQF Recommendation's quality principles, defined in Annex V of the EQF Recommendation, and a coherent link can be established between the Micro-credential Recommendation's Annex I and the 2017 EQF Recommendation's Annex VI in relation to data fields. This underlines the coherent link between these two instruments. Again, the coherence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation with this policy instrument lies in its potential role to facilitate a more structured approach to learning outcomes and their inclusion into national qualifications frameworks, which can also increase the transparency of micro-credentials at EU level. One respondent to the public consultation pointed to limits to what can be achieved by the EQF in terms of smoothing the recognition of micro-credentials. Achieving this currently lies beyond the scope of the EQF, as the recognition of qualifications is a national competence that goes beyond the purpose of the EQF.
- The **Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts**<sup>268</sup> is coherently linked to the 2017 EQF Recommendation in its use of the national public registries for training, career guidance and validation opportunities that are eligible for support. It defines minimum types of information that such registries should hold; for qualifications, this could make use of the European Learning Model and hence of the data fields for the electronic publication of information on qualifications described in Annex VI to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. As such, this is another example in which the EQF fulfils a central and coherent role in the broader field of policy initiatives on lifelong learning in the EU.

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<sup>266</sup> See for instance European Commission (2022), [ESCO Annual Report 2021](#).

<sup>267</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

<sup>268</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 26–34.



Though not mentioned as one of its 12 key Actions, the European Skills Agenda mentions the **revised BlueCard Directive** as a relevant initiative, given its objective of attracting high-skilled talents from non-EQF third countries<sup>269</sup>. The Directive stipulates that Blue Card holders receive the same treatment as EU citizens with regard to the recognition of diplomas, certifications and other qualifications. The attention given to comparing qualifications from non-EQF third countries in the 2017 EQF Recommendation coherently contributes to this objective. The revised Directive also refers to EQF levels as an operationalisation of ‘higher professional qualifications’, which it links to EQF levels six or higher.

Regarding coherence with policy initiatives at **national** level, a large majority of stakeholders (no significant differences across stakeholder types indicated) indicate that the 2017 EQF Recommendation is coherent with national policy initiatives and instruments in their country. Only nine out of 102 respondents (9 %) to the survey and six out of 229 PC respondents (3 %) expressed doubts about such coherence. This finding is in line with the broad language of the objectives and actions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation (already explored in the review of internal coherence), which in fact enables all EQF countries, regardless of how certain approaches are operationalised at national level, to be covered by the scope of the Recommendation in a coherent way. This is further reflected in those case study countries in which the relationship with education reforms is explored; these case studies highlight the broad range of developments that have taken place in EQF countries (such as national education reforms, specific VET reforms, redefining education levels). The extent to which these can be attributed to the 2017 EQF Recommendation varies, but in no instances can they be classified as incoherent with the Recommendation.

To conclude, the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation are coherently positioned within the broader field of other policy initiatives at international, European and national levels, without no inconsistencies being identified with other policy initiatives. The EQF functions as a ‘translation device’ enabling the comparison of qualifications from a range of different systems and backgrounds. This forms an important building block that coherently enables other initiatives at EU level to achieve their objectives. Stakeholders, with no significant differences across types, in the survey and PC also regard the 2017 EQF Recommendation as fully coherent with national instruments and EU policy initiatives.

## 4.2. How has the EU intervention made a difference?

This section focuses on answering the evaluation questions relating to EU added value. More specifically, it assesses if the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation could have been achieved by each Member State acting alone. It also assesses EQF’s contribution to developing a common European approach to qualifications and strengthening policy cooperation in new areas at EU level, as well as the extent to which the 2017 EQF Recommendation continues to require action at EU level.

**The increased comparability and transparency of qualifications facilitated by the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation would not have been possible without action at European level.** The EQF is a common reference framework that links together the different national qualifications systems and frameworks of European countries. The EQF aims to facilitate comparability between the qualifications and education systems of European countries, and to provide a common point of reference to facilitate the recognition and transferability of qualifications<sup>270</sup>. These aims are impossible to achieve by each Member State acting alone at national level, because qualifications and education systems vary greatly between different countries, and each country possesses its own unique

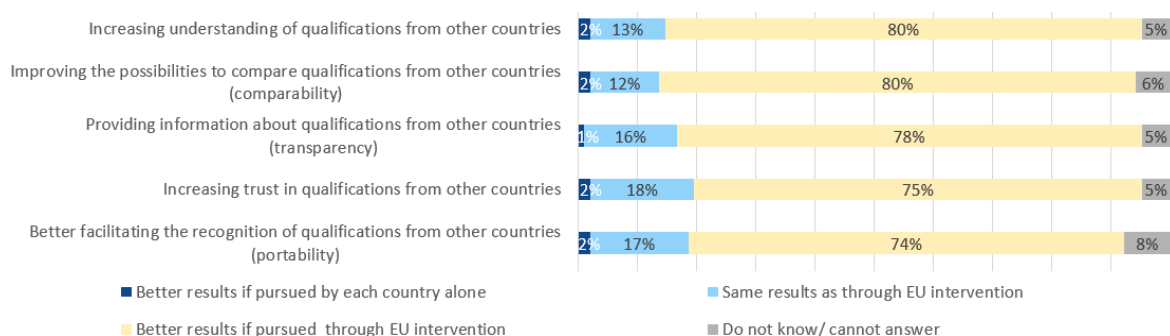
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<sup>269</sup> Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purpose of highly qualified employment, and repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC, OJ L 382, 28.10.2021, pp. 1–38.

<sup>270</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (Text with EEA relevance) OJ C 111, 6.5.2008

qualifications and education system. This makes it difficult to compare and recognise qualifications between countries without cooperation at European level. Hence, all of the **effects of the EQF presented in subsection 4.1.1 above can be considered as constituting EU added value**. The results of the survey carried out for the present study support this conclusion. The majority of survey (79 out of 102, or 77 %<sup>271</sup>) and the PC (170 out of 229, or 74 %<sup>272</sup>) respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) thought that the Member States achieved better results through EU intervention rather than working alone in terms of comparability, transparency, portability and in increasing understanding and trust in qualifications from other countries (see Figure 6 and Figure 7 below).

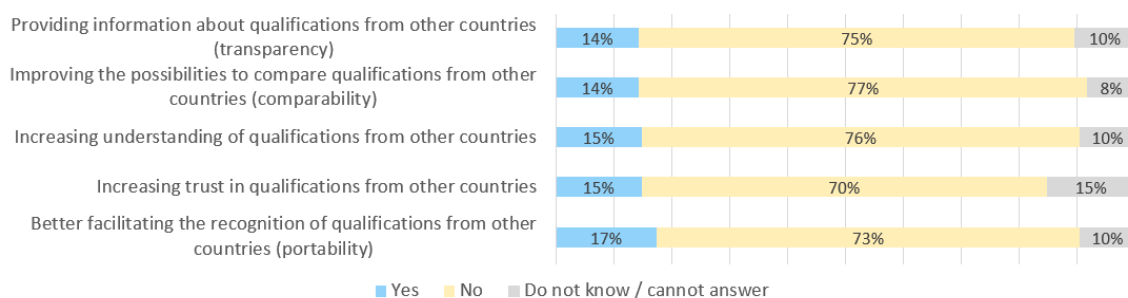
**Figure 6. Please indicate for each of the objectives below whether you think better results could have been achieved by Member States alone (i.e. without EU intervention) or through EU intervention.**



Note: Total (N)=102.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, implemented between 9 September and 24 October 2022

**Figure 7. Do you think the objectives below could have been better achieved by Member States alone (i.e. without EQF Recommendation)?**



Note: Total (N)=229.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on the EQF public consultation, 2023.

**Action at EU level is still needed to keep the EQF running and to update/improve specific provisions of it in a coordinated way**, as identified in the assessment of effectiveness (Section 4.1), because EU action is necessary to ensure the EQF remains

<sup>271</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Increasing understanding of qualifications from other countries (82 out of 102, or 80 %); Increasing trust in qualifications from other countries (77 out of 102, or 75 %); Providing information about qualifications from other countries (transparency) (80 out of 102, or 78 %); Improving the possibilities to compare qualifications from other countries (comparability) (82 out of 102, or 80 %); Better facilitating the recognition of qualifications from other countries (portability) (75 out of 102, or 74 %).

<sup>272</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Increasing understanding of qualifications from other countries (173 out of 229, or 76 %); Increasing trust in qualifications from other countries (160 out of 229 or 70 %); Providing information about qualifications from other countries (transparency) (172 out of 229, or 75 %); Improving the possibilities to compare qualifications from other countries (comparability) (177 out of 229, or 77 %); Better facilitating the recognition of qualifications from other countries (portability) (167 out of 229, or 73 %).

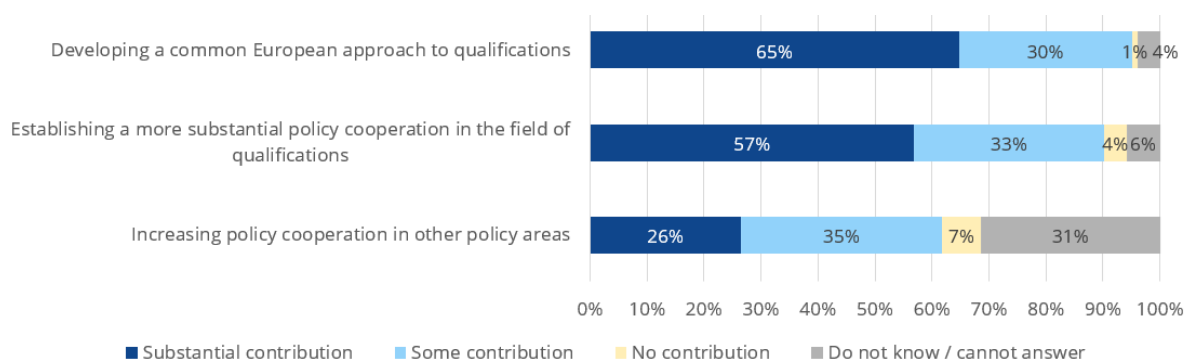
relevant and up to date. For example, (re-)referencing to review and update the links between the EQF and NQFs is needed to ensure that they remain up to date and relevant.

The **EQF**, being a common reference framework, **has contributed significantly to the development of a common European approach to qualifications**. First, the **EQF establishes a common language and structure for describing and comparing qualifications** (with eight levels of qualifications that are based on learning outcomes). This enables the comparison of qualifications across different countries and education and training systems, and contributes to increased transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications between countries (see subsection 4.1.1.1 for more details on this). In addition, the **EQF as a tool has encouraged countries to develop their own national qualifications frameworks** that are linked to the EQF, which has also helped to promote a common understanding of qualifications across Europe (see subsection 4.1.1.1 for more details). The results of the survey and PC strongly support these claims, as a large majority of respondents from all stakeholder groups thought that the 2017 EQF Recommendation had either ‘a substantial contribution’ or ‘some contribution’ to the development of a common European approach to qualifications, and in establishing more substantial policy cooperation in the field of qualifications (see Figures 8 and 9 below). It must be noted, however, that **these contributions cannot be attributed solely to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The 2008 EQF Recommendation established EQF and its key features, and 2017 EQF Recommendation was largely a continuation of its predecessor.**

**The EQF is an important tool that supports various other EU policies**, e.g. the European Education Area, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Skills Agenda, and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (see Section 3.5). While findings of the present study (including the consultations with stakeholders) show **no direct impact of the EQF on increased policy cooperation in new areas at EU level**, a small share of survey (see Figure 8) and PC (see Figure 9) respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) believed that the EQF contributed to increased policy cooperation in areas other than qualifications, compared with the EQF’s contribution to developing a common European approach to qualifications and establishing policy cooperation in the field of qualifications. Open answers to survey and PC mentioned the following areas of policy cooperation being influenced by the 2017 EQF Recommendation:

- Education policy (mentioned by a significant number of respondents), especially policies for vocational education and training, lifelong learning and adult learning, incl. in relation to qualifications outside the formal domain. In addition, policies at European level such as micro-credentials)
- Employment and international mobility, including validation and recognition of qualifications and prior learning (mentioned by several respondents)
- Migration policies especially in relation to third country dimension in EQF and international qualifications (mentioned by several respondents)
- Quality assurance methods for qualifications (mentioned by several respondents)
- Twin (digital and green) transition (mentioned by several respondents)
- Green and digital education
- Governance of AI solutions

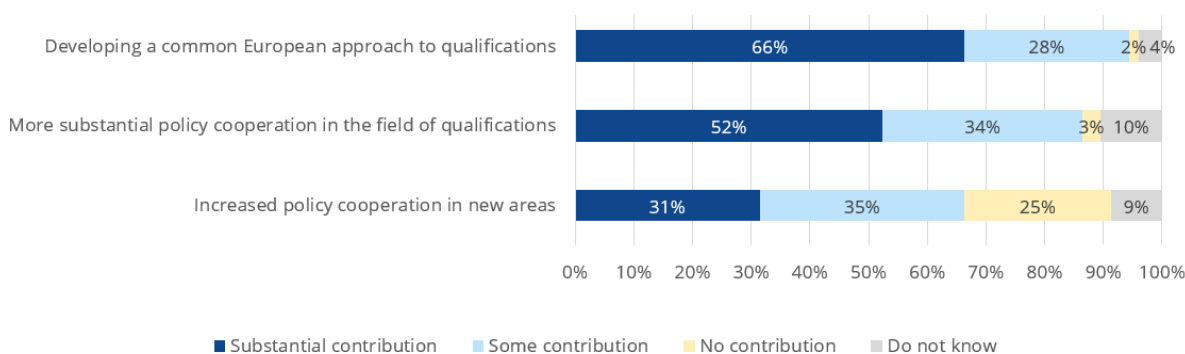
**Figure 8. In your view, what is the contribution of the EQF Recommendation to each of the following aspects:**



Note: Total (N)=102.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, implemented between 9 September and 24 October 2022

**Figure 9. To what extent does the EQF Recommendation contribute to the following:**



Note: Total (N)=229.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on EQF public consultations, 2023.

In conclusion, the increased comparability and transparency of qualifications facilitated by the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation would not have been possible without European-level action, due to the significant variation in qualifications and education systems across Europe. As a common reference framework at European level, the EQF provides a standard point of reference for the development of NQFs and establishes a shared language and structure for describing and comparing qualifications. However, it is important to note that the contributions of the EQF cannot be attributed exclusively to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as the 2008 EQF Recommendation has also played a significant role. Action is still needed at EU level to maintain and update the EQF to ensure its relevance and effectiveness. This includes, for example, reviewing and updating the links between the EQF and NQFs; encouraging links between formal, non-formal, and informal learning; and addressing areas for improvement identified in the section below on relevance.

### 4.3. Is the intervention still relevant?

This section of the report focuses on answering the evaluation questions relating to the continuing relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, assessing whether the design and implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, its objectives and provisions still correspond to the needs of different stakeholders.

### 4.3.1. The continuing relevance of the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

The context in which 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted has significantly changed since 2017, due to social and economic developments as well as various EU policy initiatives. Societies in many EQF countries continue to age. For example, the average share of people aged 60 and more across EQF countries has increased from 23.7 % in 2017 to 26.2 % in 2022<sup>273</sup> resulting in an increased share of the older population remaining in the labour market in many countries. This in turn increases the pressure on the education systems to upskill and reskill workers to maintain labour potential and resilient societies.<sup>274</sup> The twin green and digital transitions also bring new challenges, resulting in profound shifts in the skills required by the labour market<sup>275</sup>. For example, the European Commission has highlighted that 90 % of jobs currently require some kind of digital skills<sup>276</sup>. However, in 2021 only 54 % of Europeans had at least basic digital skills<sup>277</sup>. Cedefop underlines that approximately 46 % of the adult population aged 25-64 are in need of upskilling and reskilling due to a low level of education and low cognitive and digital skills<sup>278</sup>. Furthermore, many EQF countries are affected by the continuing influx of migrants, recently increased by an unprecedented inflow of people fleeing from unprovoked Russian military aggression and the invasion of Ukraine, which has implications for the adaptability of education and training systems, and brings to the forefront the recognition of foreign qualifications in the European labour market<sup>279</sup>.

All of the developments above alter the needs of EQF stakeholders. Of the EQF stakeholders consulted in the survey carried out for the present study (mainly consisting of public authorities), 64 % (65 out of 102) believed the **digital transition** to be a key macro-trend altering their needs (see Figure 10). The same opinion was expressed by 49 % (132 out of 267) of respondents to the PC (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications). Meanwhile, **migration** was identified as a key macro-trend by 66 % (67 out of 102) of survey respondents, and 22 % (58 out of 267) of PC respondents. The importance of **migration** in altering stakeholders' needs was confirmed by the various Stakeholder groups consulted in four out of five case study countries (Lithuania, Romania, Sweden and Portugal), with Finland being an exception. No significant differences were identified among the stakeholder groups. Migration, especially the recent influx of displaced people from Ukraine, has already significantly altered the needs of Lithuanian stakeholders<sup>280</sup>, making the recognition of the previous qualifications of the displaced people a very pressing issue.

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<sup>273</sup> Eurostat.

<sup>274</sup> See, for example: European Commission (2020), European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change.

<sup>275</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council (COM(2022)289) "2022 Strategic Foresight Report. Twinning the green and digital transitions in the new geopolitical context": <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0289&qid=1658824364827>

<sup>276</sup> European Commission. (2018). Digital Education Action Plan. [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en).

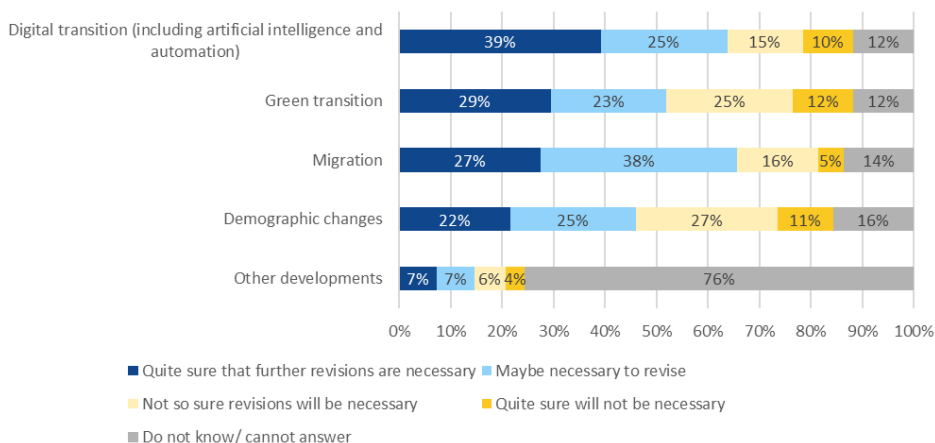
<sup>277</sup> European Commission. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022. Thematic chapters.

<sup>278</sup> Cedefop (2020). *Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways: Vol. 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series, No. 112. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/691134>

<sup>279</sup> See, for example, the ETF conversation on this topic: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/achieving-fair-recognition-migrants-qualifications> and Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 of 5 April 2022 on the recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554&from=EN>

<sup>280</sup> According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) data, Lithuania has welcomed more than 70,000 displaced people from Ukraine<sup>21</sup> since the beginning of Russia's invasion, constituting approximately 2.5 per cent of its population. This has been and remains the largest inflow of displaced people in the history of Lithuania. Source: UNCHR (2023). *Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine situation. Country chapter: Lithuania*.

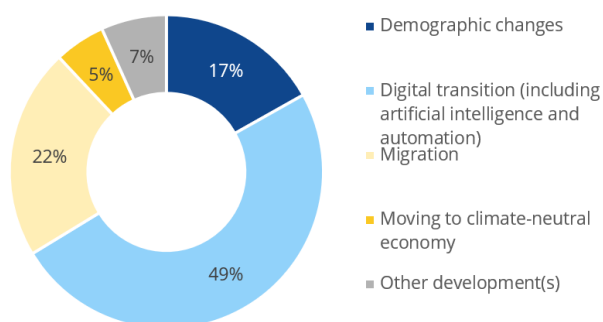
**Figure 10. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following macro-trends will impact the needs of EQF stakeholders in ways that will require further revision of the Recommendation in the coming years?**



Note: Total (N)=102, N other = 82.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, implemented between 9 September and 24 October 2022

**Figure 11. Please select one trend that in your opinion will impact the development of qualifications and their frameworks the most.**



Note: Total (N)=267.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023.

The **green transition** and **demographic changes** are seen by the stakeholders consulted as having a somewhat lesser impact on their needs. Opinions regarding the **green transition** differ between survey and PC respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), with PC respondents regarding it as having much less impact than survey respondents (see Figure 10), with only 5 % (14 out of 267) of PC respondents seeing it as a key macro-trend impacting the development of qualifications and their frameworks. In addition, the green transition was not mentioned among the key macro-trends altering their needs by the stakeholders consulted for country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries).

With regard to **demographic changes**, 46 % (47 out of 102) of survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) are 'quite sure' or believe that 'maybe' this macro-trend will require revisions to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, with consensus among stakeholder groups. Among PC respondents (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), 17 % (45 out of 267) believe demographic changes to be the key macro-trend having an impact on the development of qualifications and their frameworks. Among the stakeholders

consulted for the country case studies, only Lithuanian stakeholders mentioned demographic changes as being one of the key macro-trends altering their needs.<sup>281</sup>

**Other macro-trends** changing the needs of EQF stakeholders include the **increasing importance of remote education, changes in perceptions towards democracy, and eroding trust in governments and institutions. Various EU policy initiatives adopted since 2017** (discussed in more detail in subsection 4.1.3.2.) focusing, for example, on fostering the automatic recognition of qualifications<sup>282</sup>; increasing mobility among the VET learners<sup>283</sup>; the development of a European framework for the standardised, integrated and transparent publishing of data on skills and qualifications<sup>284</sup>; or providing more flexible learning opportunities through the introduction of micro-credentials<sup>285</sup> and individual learning accounts<sup>286</sup> **also change the context of EQF implementation and alter the needs of EQF stakeholders.**

Among the policy developments listed above, the emergence of **micro-credentials** appears to be the key development changing the needs of different EQF stakeholders and requiring revisions to the implementation of some provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation – 70 % (71 out of 102) of survey respondents are ‘quite sure’ or believe that ‘maybe’ this requires revisions. This sentiment is shared by more than half of respondents in each stakeholder group. The emergence of micro-credentials is also seen as the key policy change altering their needs by stakeholders consulted in four out of five countries (Lithuania, Finland, Romania and Sweden) in which supporting case studies were implemented. The need to adapt the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to the challenges posed by micro-credentials was also confirmed by participants in the online validation workshop.

**Despite the significant changes to the context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted, and the subsequent changes in EQF stakeholders’ needs, the relevance of the Recommendation’s objectives has only increased.** Examples of this include demographic changes and the twin transition, as well as wider EU policy changes introducing micro-credentials<sup>287</sup> and individual learning accounts<sup>288</sup>, which refer to EQF as a main reference point or suggest the adoption of the data structure outlined in Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to create a national public registry of opportunities in training, career guidance and validation. All of these reinforce the relevance of 2017 EQF Recommendation’s goals of increasing **support for flexible learning pathways and facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment.** Increased migration further underlines the relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation’s objectives of **achieving the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications and building trust and understanding in qualifications systems from other countries.** The relevance of the goal of **building trust and understanding in qualifications systems from other countries** is further reinforced by EU policy initiatives that focus on fostering the automatic recognition of qualifications<sup>289</sup> or

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<sup>281</sup> The various stakeholder groups consulted during the targeted online survey, public consultation and stakeholder consultations in countries selected for country case studies are presented in Annex 1. Detailed methodological approach

<sup>282</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, pp. 1–16

<sup>283</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16

<sup>284</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.

<sup>285</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

<sup>286</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 26–34.

<sup>287</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

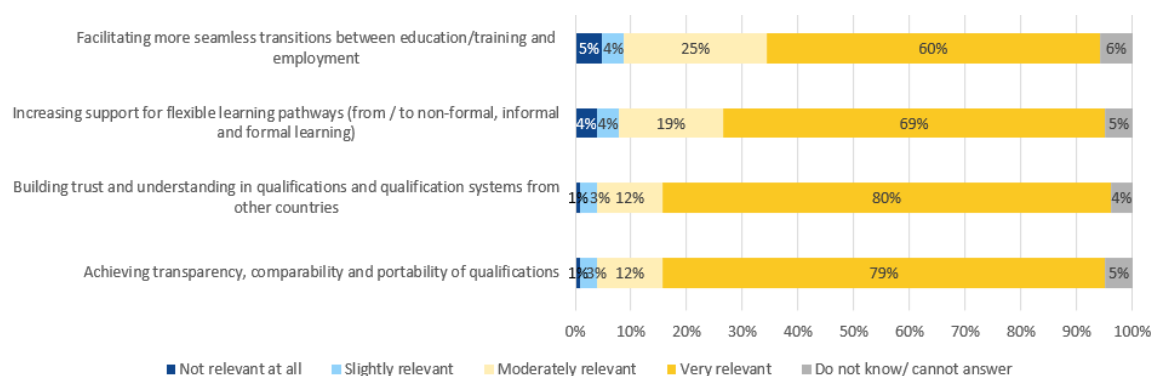
<sup>288</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 26–34.

<sup>289</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, [OJ C 444](#), 10.12.2018, pp. 1-8.

increasing mobility among the VET learners<sup>290</sup>, which refer to the EQF as a key framework enabling their implementation. The relevance of the EQF in achieving the **transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications** is reinforced by policy developments aimed at developing a European framework for standardised, integrated and transparent publishing of data on skills and qualifications<sup>291</sup>, based on data fields for the electronic publication of information on qualifications outlined in Annex VI of 2017 EQF Recommendation.

**The continuing relevance of all of the 2017 EQF Recommendation’s objectives is confirmed by the survey** (mainly consisting of public authorities, see Figure 12), **as well as by respondents to the PC** (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) **and by stakeholders in the country case studies** (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries). However, some differences are seen between the respondents to the survey and the PC with regard to which of these objectives are the most relevant. Of the survey respondents, 92 % (94 out of 102) believed **building trust and understanding in qualifications and qualifications systems from other countries** to be among the most relevant objectives, compared with 95 % in the PC (254 out of 267), with consensus among stakeholder groups.

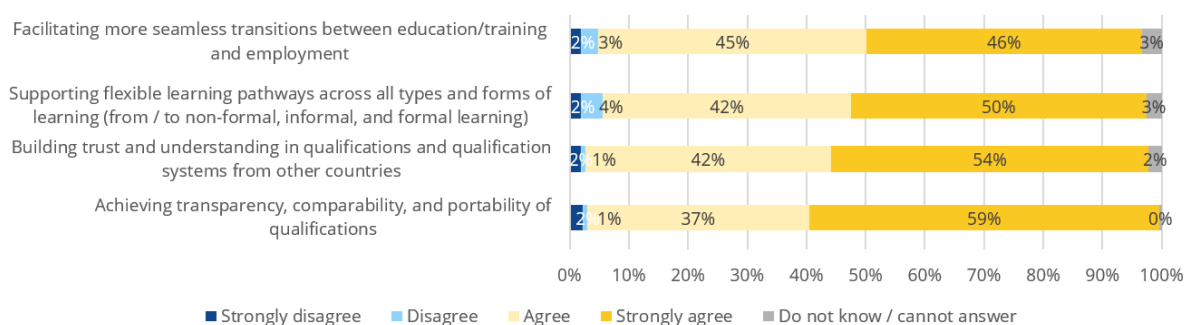
**Figure 12. To what extent do you think the following objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant today?**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: authors’ own elaboration, based on online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, 2022

**Figure 13. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following goals will remain relevant (important) in the future due to developments like moving to climate-neutral economy, digital transition, migration pressures, demographic changes?**



Note: Total (N)=267.

<sup>290</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, pp. 1–16

<sup>291</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, pp. 42–50.



Source: authors' own elaboration, based on the EQF public consultation, 2023.

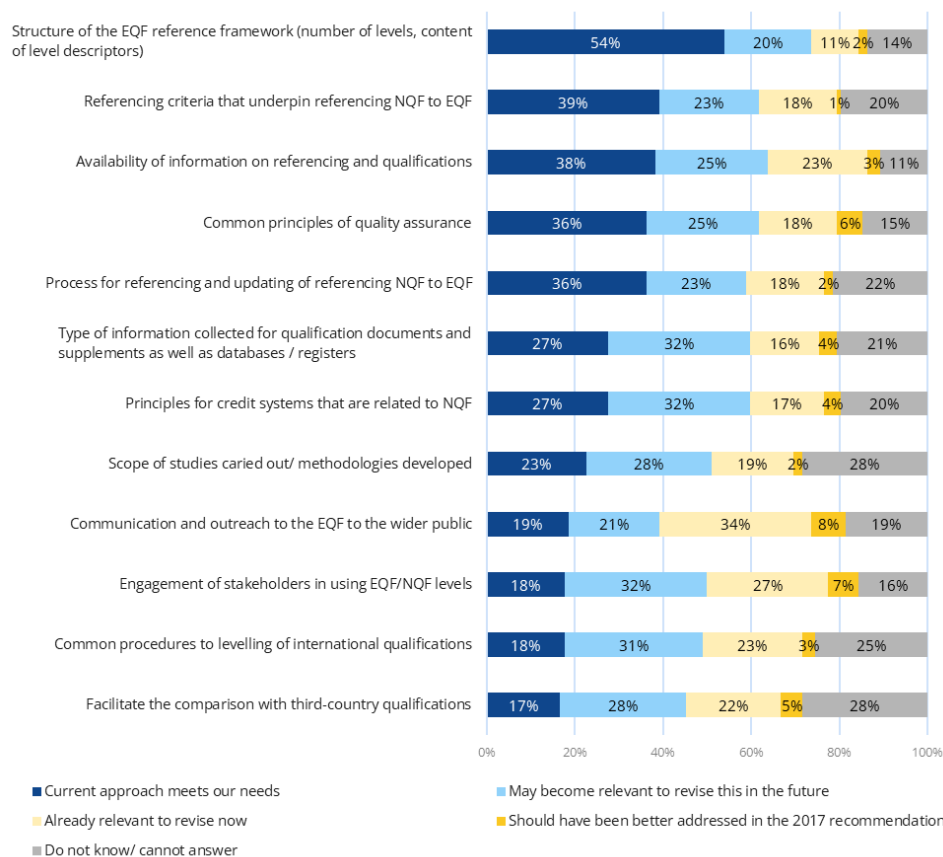
Opinions regarding the goal of **achieving transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications** also show consensus among stakeholders responding to the survey and the PC. Among stakeholder in the PC, it was seen as the most relevant goal, chosen by 97 % of stakeholders (258 out of 267). Among respondents to the survey, it was named by (91 % (93 out of 102) – making it the second most relevant objective. Other differences can also be seen between different stakeholder groups. Representatives of public authorities appeared to believe it to be more relevant than other stakeholder groups. Among survey respondents, the majority (80 % (53 out of 66)) public authority representatives believed this 2017 EQF Recommendation objective to be 'very relevant', while 48 % (8 out of 17) end beneficiaries, 81 % (9 out of 11) education and training providers, and 70 % (7 out of 10) respondents under 'other' category believed this objective to be either 'moderately relevant' or felt that they did not know/could not assess its relevance.

**Facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment and increasing support for flexible learning pathways** are seen as relevant by 92% (245 out of 267) of PC and, respectively, 85 % (87 out of 102) and 87 % (89 out of 102) of survey respondents. Most respondents in each stakeholder group see **facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment** as 'very relevant', with the exception of end beneficiaries, the majority of whom are divided between seeing the objective as 'moderately relevant' (41 %, or 7 out of 17) and 'very relevant' (47 %, or 8 out of 17).

#### 4.3.2. The continuing relevance of specific 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions

Concerning the correspondence of specific 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions to the current needs of EQF stakeholders, the evidence gathered suggests that **no changes are needed to the legal text and general structure and framework of the EQF**. The implementation of some 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions, however, could be adjusted or strengthened. As seen in Figure 14 below, the opinions of respondents to the targeted survey (mainly consisting of public authorities) regarding whether provisions of its implementation require adjustment, appears to differ according to the provision in question.

**Figure 14. Please indicate for each of the following provisions of the EQF Recommendation to what extent you expect that these should be revised in the future.**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on the targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework, implemented between 9 September and 24 October 2022

According to the respondents to both the survey and the PC (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), as well as stakeholders consulted in the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), **the implementation of the majority of the provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation should either be adjusted and/or strengthened now, or will probably need to be revised in the future.** In particular, the current implementation of the **communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public, the information collected for qualification documents, the levelling of international qualifications, the facilitation of comparison with non-EQF third country qualifications, the structure of the EQF reference framework and the common principles on quality assurance** do not fully correspond to the needs of the stakeholders consulted.

A detailed assessment of those provisions whose implementation could be adjusted or further strengthened to correspond to the shifting needs of stakeholders, is presented below:

a) **Communication and outreach of the EQF to wider public.** The majority (63 %, or 65 out of 104) of survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) believe that **it is relevant to adjust the implementation of communication and outreach of the EQF to**

**wider public**<sup>292</sup>. No significant differences between stakeholder groups are observed. This is confirmed by stakeholders consulted in the five case study countries, by respondents to the PC, and by participants in the online validation workshop. According to the Romanian and Finnish stakeholders consulted (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), the communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public is currently neither systematic, nor sufficiently structured or targeted towards specific groups at both European and national levels. The Finnish stakeholders who were consulted further emphasised that current communications concerning the EQF do not clearly outline the potential practical use and limitations of the EQF for different target groups. Therefore, the expectations of different target groups around the use of this tool are not well managed. This sentiment was shared by PC respondents and participants in the online validation workshop. Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities) believed that better communication and outreach of the EQF could be achieved through regular monitoring and evaluation of the use of information published in national databases, evaluating how often and by which groups the information is being accessed.

b) **Information collected for qualification documents, supplements and databases/registers.** Around half of survey respondents (51 %, or 53 out of 104)) believed that **the implementation of this provision is relevant to adjust**. The implementation of this provision mainly does not meet the needs of end beneficiaries and respondents under the “Other” category. Only 24 % (4 out of 17) and 10 % (1 out of 10), respectively, believed that current implementation meets their needs. The need to adjust the implementation of this provision is confirmed by stakeholders consulted in the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), European-level interview respondents (international qualifications experts), and participants in the online validation workshop. Stakeholders consulted in Romania and Sweden (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) noted that currently, the elaboration and quality of national registers differs significantly between EQF countries, and that they are insufficiently well integrated and lack interoperability. Even though Europass is seen as a platform for coordinating data in different databases, its uptake is currently not sufficient (for more details on this, see subsection 4.1.1.2 of this report) In addition, EQF-related databases and registers currently do not make use of digital tools (e.g. artificial intelligence) and are not well linked to other existing data sources (e.g. ESCO or Eurostat), which would allow big data analysis and make it easier to search for relevant information. Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities) further pointed out that guidance is currently lacking about how EQF countries should deal with information on qualifications that can no longer be acquired but remains relevant due to individuals still holding them. Whether such information should be presented in national databases remains an open question.

c) **Levelling of international qualifications.** Most respondents to the survey (54 %, or 56 out of 104), with no significant differences between stakeholder groups including public authorities, end beneficiaries, education and training providers, believed that **the implementation of common procedures for the levelling of international qualifications should be strengthened**. This is confirmed by the stakeholders consulted in the country case studies and by respondents to the PC. According to stakeholders consulted in Romania and Portugal (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), more structured guidance is needed on the allocation of levels to international qualifications. Further facilitation of the development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks is also required, as is the provision of guidance on their direct referencing to the EQF. A pilot project on developing a sectoral qualifications framework for air transport, implemented in Romania

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<sup>292</sup> Here, and in relation to later questions, this includes respondents who selecting the answers “Already relevant to revise now”, “May become relevant to revise this in the future” and “Should have been better addressed in the 2017 recommendation”

by the University Politehnica of Bucharest and financed under an Erasmus+ project with participation from universities, air transport training providers and employers from five Member States (Romania, France, Croatia, Portugal and Italy) could be regarded as an example of good practice in this case. The result of this project was a report identifying and describing 30 qualifications relevant to the air transport sector.

d) **Facilitating comparison with qualifications from non-EQF third countries.** Around half of respondents to the survey (56 %, or 58 out of 104), with no significant differences between stakeholder groups, indicated **that the facilitation of comparison with qualifications from non-EQF third countries needs to be strengthened.** The need to further facilitate tighter collaboration with non-EQF third countries, especially those that have already completed a comparison pilot project is confirmed by interviews (with representatives of the ETF, ENRIC-NARIC, EQF Advisory, EQF AG members, and international qualifications experts), as well as respondents to the PC and stakeholders consulted in the country case studies. According to the stakeholders consulted in the country case studies, comparison with qualifications from non-EQF third countries has become especially important since the start of Russian war in Ukraine, when unprecedented numbers of displaced persons fled Ukraine and settled in EU Member States. Based on this experience, country stakeholders – especially those in **Lithuania**– perceive a lot of added value in further comparing the qualification frameworks of EU southern and eastern neighbourhood countries (which currently do not belong to the EQF) to the EQF.

e) **Structure of the EQF reference framework.** Around half of respondents to the survey (53 %, or 55 out of 104) indicated that **the current structure of the EQF reference framework meets their needs.** It seems to best fit the needs of public authority representatives, with 59 % (39 out of 66) of respondents belonging to this stakeholder group believing that the current approach meets their needs. Meanwhile, the opinions of the end beneficiaries and education and training providers appear more scattered. Fewer than half of end beneficiaries (41 %, or 7 out of 17) and education and training providers (36 %, or 4 out of 11) believed that the current structure of the EQF meets their needs, while others believe it is relevant to revise it. The current EQF reference framework also seems to fit the needs of the stakeholders consulted in the country case studies. **No need for changes to the number of levels or the content of the level descriptors was identified during the consultations.** Lithuanian, Finnish, Romanian and Swedish stakeholders who were consulted (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), however, reported experiencing certain **issues relating to the practical application of the EQF reference framework.** The Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials<sup>293</sup> stresses that the EQF is open to all types and levels of qualifications, and is therefore open to micro-credentials, as and when they are first included into NQFs. Thus, the referencing of micro-credentials is essentially regarded as a national competence. According to the stakeholders consulted in the countries mentioned above, however, current guidance on including and referencing micro-credentials to EQF levels is not enough to successfully carry out this process at national level. The Lithuanian and Finnish stakeholders consulted (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) further emphasised that the current **guidance and sharing of best practices on opening up their NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings is lacking.** Because the referencing of general education varies between countries, Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities) further expressed a lack of guidance regarding the extent to which general education should be referenced to the EQF, and whether the EQF level attained through general education programmes should be indicated on general education certificates.

f) **Quality assurance.** Around half of respondents to the survey (49 %, or 51 out of 104) believed that **the application of the common principles of quality assurance should be**

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<sup>293</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, pp. 10–25.

**strengthened.** The application of the common principles of quality assurance seems to best fit the needs of education and training providers (55 %, or 6 out of 11 of respondents believed that the current approach meets their needs). Among other stakeholder groups, around one-third of all respondents indicated that the current approach meets their needs. From consultations with Lithuanian and Swedish stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), it appears that some practical quality assurance issues are emerging. Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities) raise **the issue of the quality assurance of online education and training**, especially that delivered by private education and training providers. While trust in qualifications acquired through conventional forms of learning is more or less already ingrained, according to Lithuanian stakeholders, the emergence of new forms of learning raises questions concerning the quality of the qualifications acquired in this way. The quality of online courses and the qualifications acquired through them can vary from country to country. As of now, an overall European approach to ensuring the quality of online learning appears to be lacking, and **the quality assurance principles outlined in the Annex IV of 2017 EQF Recommendation are not systematically applied.** Swedish stakeholders further pointed out that the principles of quality assurance are also not systematically applied to non-formal learning across the EQF countries. The presence of these issues is confirmed by interview respondents representing international organisations (UNESCO).

In conclusion, the study suggests that various macro-economic and policy developments (e.g. ageing societies, the green and digital transitions, and migratory pressures) have reinforced the relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The evidence gathered also suggests that no changes are needed to the legal text and general structure and framework of the EQF. However, the implementation of some provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (namely, communication and outreach of the EQF to wider public; engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels; common procedures for levelling international qualifications; and the facilitation of comparison with qualifications from non-EQF third countries) is in need of adjustment or strengthening (e.g. through further guidance) in order to remain relevant.

## 5. Conclusions and lessons learned for further EU action

### 5.1. Conclusions

#### Conclusions on the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

The specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are, **to a large extent, implemented effectively by European-level and national-level stakeholders**. When reviewing the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its effectiveness, the continuity provided from the 2008 EQF Recommendation is an important factor. The 2017 EQF Recommendation seeks to strengthen the approach established by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, while seeking to streamline and formalise practices and trends that emerged from cooperation between countries and stakeholders. A total of 17 out of the 18 specific provisions can to some extent be linked to work from before 2017, either as an immediate continuation of earlier progress (e.g. supporting the consistent use of learning outcomes, making information available on the levels of qualifications); formalising existing practices (e.g. on referencing, updating referencing reports, credit system development); or fine-tuning existing provisions (e.g. opening up to qualifications outside the formal system, linking qualification databases to Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR)). The remaining new provision focus on the development of criteria/procedures that can enable comparison with qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries. Even here, the work already undertaken builds on activities and pilot projects initiated by the EQF Advisory Group (AG) prior to 2017. In the following, what has been achieved by each of these provisions is presented.

- **Strengthening the implementation of the EQF:** the 2017 EQF Recommendation has continued the same approach to referencing taken since 2008, and continues to be seen as a vital instrument, albeit a time-intensive one, for critical reflection and engagement with stakeholders. The introduction of a formal provision calling for updates to referencing in the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been implemented effectively, given that the number of updates since 2017 is in line with expectations. Without any fixed criteria to determine the need for such updates, Member States (MS) themselves need to take the initiative with regard to re-referencing. This means that it will prove important in the coming years to monitor whether the number of updates follows the extent to which national qualifications systems evolve over time.
- **Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning:** a review of developments between 2017 and 2022 offers evidence that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been somewhat effective in encouraging better links to qualifications outside the formal education and training system. Even where the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not explicitly recommend that EQF countries should expand the comprehensiveness of their national frameworks and systems, the EQF provides an overarching framework and supports broader developments in that direction. Developments to include non-formal qualifications are more often observed in countries with more mature qualifications systems. Around half of EQF countries have National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) that are not open to non-formal qualifications. However, within this group, either work is ongoing to some extent, or qualifications outside the formal domain can be linked to NQFs through validation arrangements.
- **Linking the common principles to NQFs:** The common principles on quality and credit systems introduced in the 2017 EQF Recommendation were found to add

limited new provisions in comparison to the 2008 EQF Recommendation. The existing referencing work and developed structures of NQFs are already perceived as contributing to trust in the quality of qualifications, even where the 2017 EQF Recommendation does not have a direct effect on quality assurance principles. In addition, with regard to those credit systems linked to NQF, the present study has observed marginal changes in the way that credit systems are organised and linked to the NQF as a result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The majority of countries with credit systems linked to NQFs had already done so prior to 2017.

- **Availability and accessibility of information about qualifications:** all Member States with referenced NQFs now present EQF levels on some type of qualification documents. This provides evidence of the effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as it represents a considerable improvement on the situation before 2017. Broader effects can be observed in terms of the accessibility of information about qualifications and their learning outcomes, which can be linked to the implementation of provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In addition, beyond core information on the content/level of qualifications, broader EQF/NQF communication activities undertaken since 2017 at EU level and by EQF countries themselves have helped to raise awareness about the EQF. Challenges persist in reaching end-users and measuring which communication activities are the most effective, and to what extent.

## Conclusions on the results and impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (effectiveness)

The **2017 EQF Recommendation continued the journey of improving the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications**, as initiated by the 2008 EQF Recommendation (Specific Objective 1). Further improvements with regard to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications were reported across the board as a result of the continued framework for European cooperation on qualifications, structured by the new and updated provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Crucial developments that underpin such impacts, such as the referencing criteria, horizontal comparisons and studies all predate 2017, and have been retained as provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Stakeholders who were surveyed (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) and interviewed (mainly authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) for the present study were largely positive about the 2017 EQF Recommendation's effectiveness regarding the transparency and comparability of qualifications, both within and between countries. Case studies also highlight that respondents are often not able to distinguish effectively between the achievements of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the 2017 EQF Recommendation – or, in fact, the national reforms that have helped to modernise education and training in their countries.

Moreover, the 2017 EQF Recommendation has **contributed to facilitating lifelong learning (Specific Objective 2) by helping to further strengthen the establishment of the EQF between 2017 and 2022; however, potential remains to reduce barriers to lifelong learning more actively in the future**. The outcomes of the 2017 EQF Recommendation's in facilitating lifelong learning are not visible in terms of significantly improving participation rates in lifelong learning (i.e. these did not increase significantly between 2017 and 2022). However, a positive effect can be seen through its contribution to encouraging national reforms that aim to improve conditions for adults to learn. Since 2017, NQFs have become more comprehensive in terms of the number of levels they cover (in the case of all NQFs); the number of education and training sectors (all NQFs but six cover all formal education and training sectors); and in the increased openness of some NQFs to qualifications offered outside of formal education and training systems. With regard to the last category, progress is modest, as this group of countries has increased from eight to 13

since 2017. Considerable scope remains for further improvements in links to qualifications beyond the formal system in the future.

At national level, the **EQF and NQFs help to inspire the modernisation of education and training systems, by encouraging critical national reflections and policy development in relation to qualifications, education and training systems (Wider Objective 1)**. First, reforms identified in the present study include the development or renewal of NQFs and related measures, such as the generalisation of the use of learning outcomes, the introduction of modularisation and validation mechanisms, and the introduction of new qualification types. Second, countries have launched several reform activities since 2017 that aligned well with the 2017 EQF Recommendation to promote employability, mobility and the social integration of learners and workers – for instance, through the development of new funding mechanisms for lifelong learning or closer coordination between education providers and the labour market. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be linked to such national reforms, the drivers of these reforms tend to be more deeply rooted in national contexts (e.g. demographic change, youth unemployment, skills gaps, increasing social inequalities etc.), and are not directly related to the EQF Recommendation. The impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are seen more as factor to help reflect on specific characteristics or developments, through its comparative work and the insights into other systems gained.

The **gathered evidence does not allow concluding on a direct impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers** (wider objective 2). These are impacted by many factors, and have only an indirect relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, without visible causal relation. Indeed, the However, its link to national improvements related to (youth) employability and social integration can be through informing possible reforms that might ultimately lead to this type of measurable changes in individual behaviours of learners and workers.

Even more, while the **EQF and NQFs appear well-known among the experts in the field of qualifications, challenges remain to showcase their practical added value (use case) to end beneficiaries**. This is mainly hampered by the fact that NQFs are often not (yet) mature or comprehensive enough to serve as practical tools for learners, workers and employers to compare qualifications at a practical level. This also relates to the fact that qualifications are not described in the same way, hampering the practical comparison of qualifications and their learning outcomes. In addition, **the 2017 EQF Recommendation indirectly supports the integration of migrants from non-EQF third countries** (i.e. countries that are not involved in the EQF process), in some specific cases providing a structure for understanding qualifications and frameworks from non-EQF third countries.

## **Conclusions on costs for implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation (efficiency)**

The **costs of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation are limited, and are to a large extent outweighed by the benefits**. Costs can be identified for the implementation of specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at national level (the setting-up of qualification registers, linking the levels of the EQF/NQF to all qualifications in these registers, and conducting communication and outreach activities), as well as each country's participation in the AG.

At European level, such costs cover the provision of expertise by the European Commission, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF), as well as coordinating the work of the EQF AG and the running of its meetings and activities. Its benefits are expressed qualitatively and include increased understanding of qualifications systems across Europe, increased trust gained through working together, exchanging views and experiences, as well as reviewing (updates to) referencing. These benefits are diffuse, and cannot be expressed in monetary



terms – and therefore remain difficult to specifically compare against the costs. Nevertheless, they appear valuable set against the relatively limited costs, as also confirmed by EQF AG members, NCPs and stakeholders consulted during the case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries).

At national level, the costs related to setting up and maintaining NQFs and implementing organisations differ substantially from country to country, due to differences in the national role, purpose, maturity, and comprehensiveness of the NQF. While strictly speaking, the implementation costs for the EQF and involvement in the EQF AG activities are limited, a variety of costs are incurred at national level that may be more substantial, such as the reform of qualifications systems; revising policies and putting in place systems to level qualifications offered outside the formal education and training systems. These can be costly at national level and at the level of education providers (as qualifications authorities charge (private) providers to cover the administrative costs of applying for the inclusion of individual qualifications in NQFs).

In terms of governance, **the current composition of stakeholders represented in the EQF AG is adequate and the work of the EQF AG can be considered efficient, as EQF AG's working methods are generally effective and are perceived well by its members** – although some further improvements could be foreseen to stimulate more interaction during meetings and more exchange between National Coordination Points (NCPs). In addition, Cedefop and the ETF support and contribute to the implementation of the EQF, and the efficiency of their work in this area is perceived well by stakeholders, mainly consisting of public authorities (including EQF AG members and NCPs) and international qualifications experts. Lastly, NCPs have been established and these support the further development of the NQFs. The dissemination of information to stakeholders in the field of education and training is sufficient, but dissemination to the wider public could be strengthened.

## **Conclusions on the internal and external coherence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (coherence)**

**The provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are found to be internally coherent with its objectives.** The Recommendation offers a clear and coherent ambition to increase the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across Europe and to facilitate lifelong learning, and the defined policy actions recommended to Member States align coherently with these ambitions. The present study finds no internal contradictions when assessing the specific actions suggested in the 2017 EQF Recommendation individually against the relevant objectives, nor when reviewing the actions in their entirety against the overall framework of objectives. The broad scope of the 2017 EQF Recommendation's objectives are an explanatory factor in this coherence, as they offer multiple pathways for the implementation of its objectives, all of which contribute to the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications and with regard to building trust and understanding in qualifications systems from other countries.

With the further implementation of the EQF as an eight-level framework for qualifications at its core, the 2017 EQF Recommendation **plays an important role in supporting other policy initiatives at international, European and national level.** Moreover, other policy initiatives also strengthen the position of the EQF as a central reference framework in the broader European context. In particular, the EQF's function as a 'translation device', enabling the comparison of qualifications from a range of different systems and backgrounds, offers an important building block that coherently enables other initiatives at EU level to achieve their objectives. The stakeholders who responded to the survey and public Consultation (PC) (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) also found the 2017 EQF Recommendation fully coherent with EU and national instruments and policy initiatives. A

more in-depth review of such instruments carried out for the present study identified important complementarities and did not find any sources of incoherence. The EQF works to increase transparency and comparability with regard to the supply-side of skills (qualifications), which complements other initiatives that focus on the demand side, such as the development of European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications (ESCO) to provide a common language on occupations and skills in the labour market.

### **Conclusion on the EU added value of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (EU added value)**

The increased comparability and transparency supported by the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation **would not have been possible to achieve without European-level action**, of which the 2017 EQF is a key instrument. The EQF provides a common point of reference for the development of NQFs; it has established a common language and structure for describing and comparing qualifications, facilitating both increased transparency and better comparability of qualifications between countries. These aims would have been impossible to achieve through each of the Member States acting alone at national level, because qualifications and education systems vary greatly between different countries and each country has its own unique qualifications and education system. The EQF's contributions cannot, however, be attributed solely to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but also reflect the efforts carried out under the 2008 EQF Recommendation.

### **Conclusions on the relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (relevance)**

Various macro-economic and policy developments (e.g. ageing societies, green and digital transitions, and migratory pressures) have changed the landscape surrounding qualifications across the EU and beyond in the years leading up to 2022. In view of **the significant changes to the context in which 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted and subsequent changes in the needs of EQF stakeholders, the relevance of the Recommendation's objectives has only increased**. As such, the relevance of having an EQF linked to comprehensive NQFs to facilitate comparability, transparency and trust, remains unaltered. The continuing relevance of the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is confirmed by respondents to the survey and PC (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), and by the stakeholders consulted for the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries).

The **relevance of the implementation of certain specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation has remained unchanged (even increased), but the manner of implementation has to be adjusted to respond to stakeholder needs. The evidence gathered also suggests that no changes are needed to the legal text and general structure and framework of the EQF**. According to respondents to the survey and PC (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), as well as stakeholders consulted for the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), the implementation of communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public; information collected for qualification documents, supplements and databases/registers; common procedures for levelling international qualifications; the facilitation of comparison with qualifications from non-EQF third countries; structure of the EQF reference framework and the common principles of quality assurance require adjustments or strengthening (e.g. through further guidance) in order to remain relevant.

## 5.2. Lessons learned

The conclusions of the present study with regard to **effectiveness** and **relevance** underline the need to continue working on the further implementation of the EQF at EU level, and on the implementation of the NQFs at national level, in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation plays a key role. Its implementation helps to improve the operational value of the EQF, offering practical added value for learners, workers and employers. The conclusions of this study on **EU added value** underline that such a framework can only be developed effectively at European level, from whence other European and national-level initiatives (**coherence**) can be further developed. Based on the study's findings, the following lessons learned were identified that can support the work on the EQF in this direction in the coming years:

- 1. Secure and maintain trust in the referencing of NQFs to the EQF, and in national levelling decisions:** To support comparability, transparency and trust in qualifications between countries and education and training systems, the re-referencing process could be further strengthened to avoid having incomplete or outdated NQFs linked to the EQF. This could involve more actively encouraging countries to initiate such a re-referencing exercise, but could also consist of inviting countries to consider a more evaluative perspective on levelling decisions, levelling methods and to reflect more on social/contextual considerations in the levelling and on the levelling procedures used. Additional reflections to define criteria determining the need for updates to referencing could also be conducted, to allow a distinction to be made between updates that are not immediately necessary, and those that are desirable, or crucial. *[Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness]*
- 2. Continue encouraging Member States to ensure the development of comprehensive NQFs, covering all levels and more education and training systems, and to enable openness to qualifications offered outside of formal education and training systems.** To function as a translation device on a practical level, the EQF needs to link to comprehensive national qualifications systems, in order to allow the comparing and structuring of an increasing number and type of qualifications in Europe. A first area for attention would be to review the remaining qualifications in the formal domain that are not linked to the NQF, and the barriers and challenges to including these. A second area for attention is the ongoing work of the AG to expand the linking of qualifications from outside the formal domain to NQF, which remains vital. This is particularly important given the limited operationalisation within the 2017 EQF Recommendation itself as to how to increase such links. *[Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness and relevance]*
- 3. Launch a comprehensive and well-informed discussion, leading to a common approach on how NQFs (and the EQF) can incorporate smaller qualification units (such as micro-credentials), and what implications can be identified from providing level indications to micro-credentials.** To maintain the relevance of the EQF, a thorough reflection needs to take place regarding how the EQF and NQF can deal with smaller qualification units. Lessons can be learned from systems and procedures that already allow qualifications offered outside the formal education and training systems to be included in to NQFs; these often already include qualifications that are usually 'smaller' than formal qualifications. *[Lesson learned in relation to relevance]*
- 4. Continue the work on common qualification descriptions, to arrive at more consistent descriptions of learning outcomes across education systems and countries, to support the better take-up and use of the EQF by learners, workers and employers.** To support the comparability of qualifications in practical terms and to continue supporting the function of the EQF as a translation device for

learners, workers and employers, the information that end beneficiaries might use needs to be well described in order to allow practical comparisons between qualifications. More commonalities in the descriptions of qualifications would also contribute to the relevance and usefulness of the (linking of) qualification databases and registers, and their added value to end beneficiaries [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness*]

- 5. Further integrate the EQF with other developments and initiatives that are closer to end beneficiaries, while improving communication to explain the levels of the EQF for practical use.** To improve awareness among end beneficiaries of the EQF and NQFs, the EQF/NQF tool could be even more closely linked to the communication of other developments and initiatives that are closer to end beneficiaries (i.e. have direct application for such users). Communication could be targeted towards specific groups, social partners could be involved in information dissemination. Cedefop and ETF could be involved in more direct contact with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. through informative and educational seminars), and employers could be encouraged to use the NQF/EQF when recruiting and to support the lifelong learning of employees. The existing synergies from aligning the EQF with the Europass portal, and existing links to the work on ESCO classification, can be further expanded – for instance, through close collaboration in the further facilitation of the development of European Digital Credentials for learning in combination with the EQF. [*Lesson learned in relation to effectiveness and coherence*]

To support this work, the following lessons learned can be taken on board to further improve on the organisational and governance aspects of the EQF (**efficiency**):

- 6. Further improve the EQF AG's working methods, allowing more interaction and stimulating exchange between NCPs.** Such improvements in the organisation and governance of the EQF AG and the NCPs can reflect on the functioning and use of the platform for NCPs exchanges; follow-ups on Peer-Learning Activities (PLAs) and project group work could be carried out during EQF AG meetings, as well as on (national) barriers to arriving at decisions within the EQF AG on specific topics prepared by the project groups. In addition, in order for national representatives in the EQF AG to be better prepared and to support better discussions, documents could be shared earlier and the EQF AG agenda should allow for more engaging work formats. [*Lesson learned in relation to efficiency*]
- 7. Continue working within the framework of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and stimulate implementation through specific notes and further linking of the EQF to other European initiatives.** The 2017 EQF Recommendation remains valid as a reference point for the work of the European Commission and Member States to continue working on the EQF. Its objectives are currently defined in such a way that they cannot be measured; choosing words such as 'increasing' or 'contributing' ensures that the Recommendation provides a broader structure within which work on increasing transparency and comparability can continue. At the same time, the lack of measurable and attributable objectives (i.e. SMART), as suggested by the Better Regulation Guidelines, means that the more operational ambitions need to be defined elsewhere, such as in the AG workplans. This offers the flexibility to streamline existing provisions and include them within the overall framework, thus reducing the need for new legislative instruments. Within this framework, the implementation of the EQF could be strengthened firstly by developing specific notes that can further detail procedures relating to re-referencing, procedures for international qualifications, links to and comparisons with qualifications from non-EQF third countries; and secondly, by strengthening the prominence of the EQF in other European initiatives (such as Europass, ESCO). From the perspective of future studies, it is recommended that the key operational direction chosen within

this broader structure is formally approved and transformed through a specifically developed intervention logic that would allow progress to be reviewed against targets in a way that was not always possible in this study. *[Lesson learned in relation to efficiency and coherence]*

## 6. Annexes

### Annex 1. Detailed methodological approach

This annex presents the study approach and analytical models, detailed overview of all the study data collection and data analysis methods and techniques used, and key limitations of the study.

#### Approach to the study and analytical models

The study used mixed-method data collection and analysis approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods within an overall analytical approach guided by a comprehensive evaluation framework. In order to ensure the robustness of the study results, the following measures were implemented:

- The proposed methodology was tailored to substantially expand the knowledge-base on the implementation and effects of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The proposed data collection and analysis methods provided evidence-base covering all 38 EQF participating countries. To this end, extensive country mapping was implemented as the central data collection method. In addition, the study team gathered stakeholders' opinions and insights through interviews, a targeted online survey (hereafter: survey), and public consultation (hereafter: PC). Key thematic areas were further explored in ten case studies that illustrated broader developments across the EQF countries.
- A detailed methodological approach was presented and validated by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and EQF Evaluation Inter-Service Group (ISG) at the inception phase of the project.
- All data collection tools and questionnaires built on the evaluation matrix with detailed operationalisation of evaluation questions and concrete methods to address each question. The evaluation matrix was approved and validated by DG EMPL at the inception phase of the study.
- The study deliverables were revised by an independent quality assurance expert who ensured that the methodological approach is consistent and that the findings rely on evidence and are reliable.
- All study deliverables were discussed with DG EMPL and the EQF Evaluation Inter-Service Group (ISG) with the opportunity for them to provide written feedback.

This study looked beyond the mere impact of a measure (what works?), and also addressed the mechanisms and circumstances leading to the observed effects (effectiveness). To that purpose, the study design is based on the reconstructed theory of change (intervention logic) underpinning the initiative. The intervention logic serves as a solid basis for developing the study design, assessing the 2017 EQF Recommendation and ultimately formulating lessons learned. The intervention logic of the 2017 EQF Recommendation was developed during the inception phase of the study. The intervention logic set out a high-level understanding of the needs, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, results, and impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The intervention logic is presented in Annex 7.

The intervention logic was combined with the evaluation questions specified in the tender specifications to develop the evaluation matrix. The evaluation matrix operationalised

evaluation questions providing concrete indicators to be assessed and linked them to methodological approaches to assess them. The evaluation matrix is available in Annex 8.

The study assessed the implementation of the EQF against the five key evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, and relevance. An overview of these criteria in the context of this study are set out in the table below.

**Table 14. Overview of evaluation criteria**

Criteria	Overview of key aspects
Effectiveness	The examination of effectiveness focused on assessing the EQF contribution to achieving its (wider) objectives, implementation of key provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation addressed to Member States, to the European Commission and to the EQF Advisory Group (AG), communication efforts around the EQF, and EQF contribution to easing the integration of migrants.
Efficiency	The examination of efficiency focused on assessing costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and on assessing the extent to which the work of the EQF AG and National Coordination Points (NCPs) has been efficient, how effective have the working methods of the EQF governance structure have been, what factors influence the efficiency with which the results were achieved and how, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work of the EQF Advisory Group.
Coherence	The examination of coherence focused on assessing the extent to which the objectives, target groups and measures of the 2017 EQF Recommendation have been internally coherent and the extent to which the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been coherent with other policy initiatives and related instruments.
EU added value	The examination of EU added value focused on assessing if the 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives could have been achieved by each Member State acting alone, the EQF contribution to developing a common European approach to qualifications and strengthening policy cooperation in new areas at EU level, as well as the extent to which the 2017 EQF Recommendation continues to require action at EU level.
Relevance	The examination of relevance focused on assessing whether the design and implementation of 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives and specific provisions still correspond to the current and future needs of different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholders that may have been altered compared to 2017 by the recent social, economic and broader EU policy developments.

*Source:* authors' own elaboration based on evaluation questions defined in tender specifications.

However, as far as possible, this analytical approach needed to be complemented by an assessment of causality – i.e. the degree to which the activities implemented in response to the 2017 EQF Recommendation have in reality led to the results and impacts. A range of other factors (external to the EQF) have influenced the results and impacts of the implementation of the EQF, including the socio-economic context and other factors (e.g. green and digital transitions, migratory pressures, demographic change, youth unemployment, skills gaps, increasing social inequalities, etc.).

Thus, the study team adopted a contribution analysis approach. Contribution analysis aimed to build credible causal links, drawing upon the available sources of evidence to consider the extent to which the EQF, alongside other factors, contributed towards the observed results and impacts. This provided a way of explicitly defining and assessing the causal relationships within the intervention logic.

The different methodological approaches including secondary data analysis (desk research and mapping), the consultation activities (survey, PC), case studies, and validation workshop provided a range of evidence that was triangulated to assess the degree to which process and outcome causal chains detailed in the intervention logic are supported.

In terms of assessing costs and benefits, an objective review of the costs linked to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation was carried out. The costs were then compared against the broader benefits. Such benefits of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot be expressed in financial terms. It must be noted that the existing sources provide limited evidence to assess the costs associated with running the NCPs and supporting the implementation knowledge base of the EQF at national level. Hence, the objective overview (mostly qualitative, using quantitative data where possible), was carried out relying on desk

research, mapping, consultation activities, and case studies. The European level, data from Cedefop and ETF programming documents and Erasmus+ investments were used as an estimate for costs, as Erasmus+ is the key EU-level fund that supports implementation activities of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

## Data collection and analysis methods used

This section overviews the study data collection and data analysis methods and techniques used in detail. Each method is described separately below.

### Exploratory interviews

The objective of the exploratory interviews was to fine-tune the operationalisation of the evaluation questions, identify key stakeholders relevant for EQF, inform the design of the questionnaires for the survey and PC, and identify key themes and trends for the case studies. The following groups of stakeholders were consulted in a total of eight exploratory interviews:

- DG EMPL representatives working with the EQF (two interviews)
- ETF employees (one interview)
- Cedefop employees (one interview)
- EQF AG representatives (four interviews with representatives from France, Austria, Ireland, and the Netherlands)

### Mapping and desk research

Mapping and desk research aimed to provide a detailed overview of the state of implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. More specifically, it:

- Reviewed the existing knowledge base (including academic literature) on the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation;
- Mapped implementation progress in 38 participating countries and at the EU level and the situation in 2017 (baseline), to identify the progress between 2017 and 2022;
- Provided a wider context for the study.

Mapping and desk research relied on two pillars:

- Country mapping to identify country-level sources and review the 2017 EQF Recommendation implementation progress at the country-level. Country mapping mostly focused on EQF AG documents and Cedefop reports (e.g. NQF inventory). These results were supplemented by targeted research of national level literature and documents where this was deemed relevant (e.g. particularly for those countries where specific changes have taken place since 2017).
- Desk research that aimed to review the existing knowledge base (including academic literature) on the implementation of the activities included in the Recommendation. Desk research analysed academic articles, public agencies and official reports (from European Commission, Cedefop, ETF, Eurydice), quantitative data sources (e.g. Eurostat), and legislative and policy documents.



The list of sources used in the study is presented in Annex 9.

## Targeted online survey

The survey aimed to gather experiences, opinions, and suggestions about the 2017 EQF Recommendation. It targeted stakeholders who are involved in the EQF implementation and/or benefiting from it. The survey was open for responses between September 9 and October 24, 2022. The survey was distributed through two channels:

- EQF AG members and NCPs of each EQF country were invited to participate in the survey and to share the invitation to the survey through their network.
- The study team mapped stakeholders that were involved or mentioned in the EQF referencing reports in all EQF countries and collected their contact details on the web. Contact details of 958 stakeholders were collected. Direct invitations to complete the survey were shared with all of them. In addition to the invitation, three reminders to complete the survey were sent (on September 21, October 3, and October 11). Furthermore, to foster the responsiveness to the survey, the study team called 118 stakeholders in Denmark, Hungary, Malta, Montenegro, Türkiye, and Kosovo (as these countries were less active in the survey), to remind them about the survey.

The survey received 122 responses, of which 102 were complete and 20 were partially so. In order to get more insights, survey responses were analysed in the following breakdowns:

- Type of respondents differentiating between public authority or authority working with qualifications<sup>294</sup>, end beneficiary representatives<sup>295</sup>, and education and training providers. Different groups of stakeholders use the EQF for different reasons and to a different extent, thus they might have different perceptions about the EQF.
- Respondent country group differentiating between EU countries and non-EU countries. Different regulatory frameworks in these groups of countries could have an impact on respondents' perceptions about EQF. Since the survey targeted EQF countries, distinction between non-EU EQF countries and non-EQF countries were not made.
- Size of the country differentiating between small (population up to 10m), medium (population between 10-30 m), and large (population larger than 30m) countries to check if respondents from larger and smaller countries could have different perceptions about EQF.
- Respondent country groups differentiating between countries that referenced their qualifications to the EQF by the end of 2017 (before the year of 2017 EQF Recommendation), and countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2017. The time of referencing to EQF might have impact on the extent to which EQF is implemented and used in the country leading to different perceptions about EQF.

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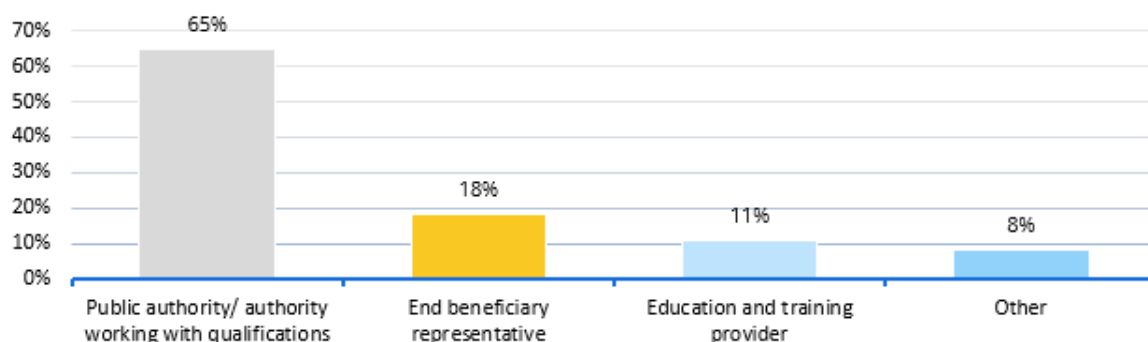
<sup>294</sup> Under this group the following types of representatives are included: Representative of government/ministry (national or regional); Qualifications authority/agency; Accreditation body; Body involved in the recognition of academic and professional qualifications; Body awarding qualifications; Quality assurance body; Employment service; Services in charge of migrant integration

<sup>295</sup> Under this group the following types of representatives are included: Employers and their representatives; Sectoral organisation representatives; Employees/ workers and their representatives (e.g. unions); Student/ learner or their representatives

- Going beyond 2017 as a baseline it was checked how countries that referenced their qualifications to the EQF at the beginning differ from the ones that referenced later. The year of 2012 was selected as a cut-off point, as the previous EQF evaluation took into account the period between 2008 and 2012.

The majority (79 or 65%) of respondents were representatives of public authority or authority working with qualifications<sup>296</sup>. This was followed by end beneficiary representatives<sup>297</sup> (22 or 18%) and education and training providers (13 or 11%). The rest (10 or 8%) were representatives classifying themselves into other categories, for instance, research institution, freelance educationalist, national institute for VET or Europass Centre (see Figure 15 below).

**Figure 15. Respondents' distribution, by type**

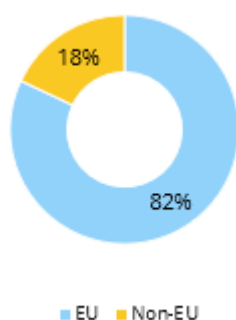


Note: Total (N)=122. Percentages do not add to 100%, since respondents could choose more than one answer. Other category includes: not for profit organisations, research institutions, freelancers, experts, counsellors, national Europass Centre, national council for development of human potential.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

The majority (99 or 82%) of respondents were from Member States, while one fifth (23 or 18%) of the respondents were non-EU country residents (see Figure 16 below). More than half (62 or 55%) of the respondents were from medium countries (population 10-30M), while the rest were from small (26 or 23%, population up to 10M), and big (24 or 22%, population >30M) countries.

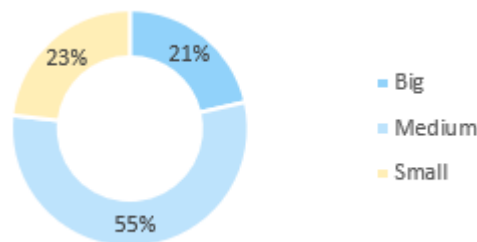
**Figure 16. Respondents' distribution, by EU vs non-EU**



Note: Total (N)=112

Source: own elaboration based on online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 2022

**Figure 17. Respondents' distribution, by country size**



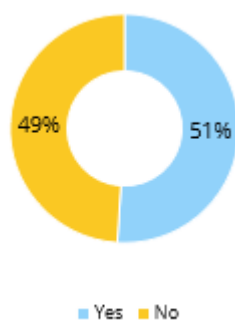
Note: Total (N)=112

<sup>296</sup> Under this group the following types of representatives are included: Representative of government/ministry (national or regional); Qualifications authority/agency; Accreditation body; Body involved in the recognition of academic and professional qualifications; Body awarding qualifications; Quality assurance body; Employment service; Services in charge of migrant integration

<sup>297</sup> Under this group the following types of representatives are included: Employers and their representatives; Sectoral organisation representatives; Employees/ workers and their representatives (e.g. unions); Student/ learner or their representatives

The distribution between respondents from countries that had not completed a referencing in 2012 was almost equal (55 or 51% from referenced countries and 53 or 49% - not referenced, see Figure 18), this was not the case between countries referenced during baseline (by the end of 2017). In that case, the majority (82 or 76%) were referenced by the end of 2017, while 26 or 24% were not (see Figure 19).

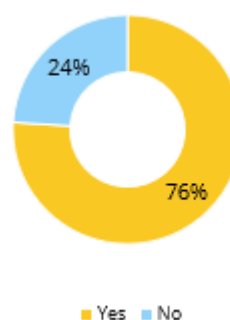
**Figure 18. Has the country referenced by the end of 2012**



Note: Total (N)=108

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

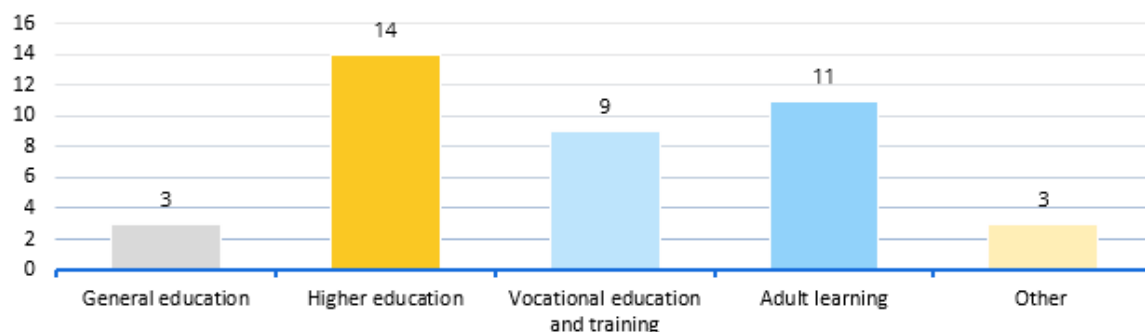
**Figure 19. Has the country referenced during baseline (by the end of 2017)**



Note: Total (N)=108

Over half of respondents participated/worked in higher education (14 or 67%) or adult learning (11 or 52%) training sectors. This was followed by vocational education and training (9 or 43%). General education and other training sector representatives were the least prominent (3 or 14% each). Among other, representatives mentioned non-formal and informal education (see Figure 20 below).

**Figure 20. Respondents' distribution, by education**



Note: Total (N)=21.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

### Interviews about EU level policies

Interviews mainly aimed to explore European-level reflections on evaluation criteria in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Interviews focused exclusively on the EU/international level and served to explore EQF development at the EU level more in-depth (including governance, coherence, value added, etc.). In addition, interviews provided some insights from EQF AG members and NCPs on the national level situation in the selected countries.

The study team carried out 21 interviews with the following groups of respondents between January 11 and February 21, 2023:

- Selection of EQF AG members and EQF NCPs – respondents who did not complete the survey were selected. This was done in order to have better overall country coverage and to not target the same stakeholders multiple times and to avoid overburdening them. In addition to reflections about EU level policies, in these interviews evidence was gathered on national developments.
- ENIC-NARIC – respondents from the countries that are among top 10 destination countries in 2019 ENIC-NARIC report<sup>298</sup> were selected, as they should have the most experience with recognition of qualifications from other countries.
- International qualifications experts – selected authors of the publications used in this study and representatives of international organisations working with qualifications (e.g. UNESCO, ILO).
- Third country representatives – representatives of countries that cooperated with EQF.

The list of interviewees is presented in the table below (the experts interviewed have given their explicit consent to have their names published according to the process set out in the privacy statement<sup>299</sup>). The interview questions focused on the following areas:

- Governance and efficiency (EQF AG working methods, involvement and engagement of stakeholders, online platform for exchange of information, costs and benefits of EQF implementation);
- Impacts of the EQF and 2017 EQF Recommendation;
- EQF role in migrant integration;
- Coherence and relevance of the EQF and 2017 EQF Recommendation.

**Table 15. List of interviewees**

No	Respondent(s) name(s)	Respondent type	Interview date	Country
1	Anonymous respondent	ENIC-NARIC	Completed Feb 20	Romania
2	Borhene Chakroun	International qualifications experts (UNESCO)	Completed Feb 7	Not relevant
3	Carita Blomqvist and Taija Paasilinna	EQF AG members	Completed Jan 13	Finland
4	Edit Balogh	NCPs	Completed Jan 11	Hungary
5	Eduarda Castel Branco	ETF representative	Completed Feb 6	Not relevant
6	Grant Klinkum	Third country representatives	Completed Jan 31	New Zealand
7	Gro Beate Vige and Anne Sofie Holter	EQF AG members	Completed Jan 31	Norway
8	Helene Bekker	ENIC-NARIC	Completed Feb 15	France
9	Irina Dimitrova, Siliva Toneva	EQF AG members	Completed Jan 16	Bulgaria
10	James Keevy	International qualifications experts (JET Education Services)	Completed Feb 1	Not relevant
11	Jane Azurin, Evelyn Chian, Joanna Wilson and Andrew Ritchie	Third country representatives	Written response	Australia
12	Anonymous respondent	ENIC-Board	Completed Feb 2	Not relevant

<sup>298</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/item-11-b-report-on-the-global-dimension-of-the-enic-naric-pd/1680967128>

<sup>299</sup> Privacy statement is available here: <https://www.visionary.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-use-of-your-personal-data-and-your-rights.pdf>

No	Respondent(s) name(s)	Respondent type	Interview date	Country
13	Jitka Pohankova and Milada Stalker	NCPs	Completed Jan 13	Czechia
14	Josipa Česnovar	EQF AG members	Completed Jan 17	Croatia
15	Karin Luomi-Messerer	International qualifications experts	Completed Feb 8	Not relevant
16	Anonymous respondent	NCP	Completed Feb 1	Austria
17	Maria Cynthia Banzon Bautista	Third country representatives (ASEAN QF)	Completed Feb 21	Philippines
18	Anonymous respondent	EQF AG members	Written response	Kosovo
19	Pedro Moreno	International qualifications experts (ILO)	Completed Feb 7	Not relevant
20	Yuriy Rashkevich	Third country representatives	Completed Feb 6	Ukraine
21	Anonymous respondent	Public authority	Completed Jan 17	Malta

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Case studies

### Approach to case study design

The case studies aimed to provide a more in-depth analysis of the state of implementation of the activities related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In particular, they helped to:

- Highlight specific experiences with the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of specific activities under the 2017 EQF Recommendation;
- Understand how different national contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Based on a careful assessment of the available sources to answer the evaluation questions and the identification of gaps in the available information, ten study topics were identified. Table 16 provides an overview of the case study topics and case study countries. The case study topics were selected to address the evaluation questions, to cover topics in relation to new aspects of the Recommendation or areas of the Recommendation with less progress so there could be better identification as to why.

Topics providing evidence for evaluation questions related to implementation of key provisions of the Recommendation addressed to Member States (Review and update the referencing (covered by case study 1); Quality assurance; Credit systems; Databases and registers (covering reference to EQF levels and availability of referencing process results); Communication, outreach, and encouraging use of EQF). In addition, more overarching topics were selected (Comparability and portability of qualifications; Conditions for lifelong learning; Third country qualifications and migration; Efficiency; Relevance).

Ten case studies covering 15 countries were implemented. The case studies did not aim to be representative for all EQF countries, but aimed to showcase and illustrate differences between countries within a wider perspective that is provided through other research methods (country mapping, desk research, survey, PC). The case studies aimed to represent different types of E&T systems (different well-fare states and skills formation systems); different geographical orientations and sizes; different stages of development of NQFs. The following table provides an overview of how the selection of countries provide a balanced approach in relation to different country characteristics.

**Table 16. Country characteristics for case study selection**

Country	Size (1)	Geographical location	Well-fare state (2)	Skills formation system (3)	Development stage (4)	EQF reference (5) before, after 2017, review
CZ	Medium	Central EU	Embedded neoliberal	German Model	The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) is operational	2011
DE	Large	NW-EU	Conservative familistic	German Model	Operational	2012
DK	Small	N-EU	Social democratic	Collective	Operational	2011
ES	Large	SW-EU	Conservative familistic	Statist	Advanced design stage of NQF for LLL (MECU)	
FI	Small	N-EU	Social democratic	Statist	Operational	2017
FR	Large	SW-EU	Conservative familistic	Statist	Operational	2010, update 2021
IE	Small	NW-EU	Liberal	Liberal	Operational / review	2009, 2020 update
LT	Small	NE-EU	Neoliberal	Statist	Operational	2011
NL	Medium	NW-EU	Conservative familistic	Collective	Operational / review	2011, 2019 update
PL	Large	NE-EU	Embedded neoliberal	Statist	Operational	2013 (review planned 2022)
PT	Medium	SW-EU	Conservative familistic	Statist	Operational	2011
RO	Medium	SE-EU	Neoliberal	Statist	Operational	2018
RS	Small	Non-EU	Neoliberal	Statist	Activation stage	2020, It was referenced to the EQF in 2020 – now not indicated
SE	Medium	N-EU	Social democratic	Statist	Activation stage	2016
SI	Small	SE-EU	Conservative familistic	German Model	Operational	2013

Source: Authors. (1) Eurostat, Population 2022, own 150 categorization (less than 10m = small, 10- to 30m = medium, more than 30m = big); (2) based on classification by Saar, E.; Ure, O.-B. (2013). Lifelong learning systems: overview and extension of different typologies. In: Saar, E.; Ure, O.-B.; Roosalu, T. (eds). Lifelong Learning in Europe: National Patterns and Challenges. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. (3) Bussemeyer, M.R.; Trampusch, C. (2012). The Comparative Political Economy of Collective Skill Formation. In: M.R. Bussemeyer; Trampusch, C. (eds). The Political Economy of Collective Skill Formation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-40. Based on the varieties of capitalism approach and previous classifications; four types: liberal, segmentalist, statist, collective. (4), see Cedefop NQF overview 2020 and updates from the EQF AG notes. (5) idem.

The allocation of countries to specific case topics aimed to maintain a diversity in background characteristics per case. For some case studies, specific countries were selected based on developments related to the case study topic in this country. For instance, the case on comparability and portability of qualifications selected countries that, on the one hand, have referenced their frameworks to the EQF already a long time ago (and updated the referencing), and countries that only recently presented their referencing report; the case on credit systems included countries that have credit systems; the case on conditions for lifelong learning looked at countries that included non-formal qualifications and that have in place validation procedures and those that do not, the case study on database and registers took into account countries that have effective databases and those who do not.

Each case study provided information to answer a number of specific evaluation questions. Due to the breadth of different evaluation questions, the cases vary in terms of scope and

weight: some are more overarching and based on many country examples; others are more limited and targeted in terms of focusing on a specific provisions of the recommendation and are covered by a more limited number of country examples. The following table provides an overview of the case study topics and case study countries.

**Table 17. Assigning countries to case study topics**

	CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI	Total
1. Comparability and portability of qualifications		1		1		1	1								1	5
2. Conditions for lifelong learning: Better linking formal, non-formal and informal through validation of learning and including non-formal qualifications	1					1	1		1	1			1			6
3. Reforms in E&T		1			1	1							1		1	5
4. Quality assurance		1							1						1	3
5. Credit systems						1	1				1					3
6. Databases and registers					1		1	1			1	1		1		6
7. Communication, outreach and encouraging use of EQF	1		1				1		1			1	1		1	7
8. Third country qualifications and migration		1		1						1			1	1		5
9. Efficiency: costs associated with running the NCP and implementing the EQF			1						1	1					1	4
10. Relevance: future of the EQF against the context of the twin transition and future challenges to the labour market						1		1			1	1		1		5
<b>Total number of themes per country</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Approach to data collection

The **core team** was responsible for the overall preparation of all ten case studies, including the overall desk research on each theme, as well as in the overarching analysis and formulation of conclusions. This European-level desk research gathered existing evidence from academic and grey sources on the key topics pre-selected for the case studies. It included a European perspective and a broad country mapping across all countries.

**Selected country experts** were responsible for gathering data at national level through desk research, interviews and/or group interviews. Interviews and/or group interviews targeted 131 people in total (see Table 18 for the distribution of respondents per country, group, and method of interaction). Group interviews were held with the logic that they would save time by collecting insights from multiple stakeholders simultaneously, and to foster discussion and identify key points of consensus and debate. The group interviews collected stakeholders' inputs, positions, and opinions on those topics in the selected case study countries for each theme. The desk research took into account national sources on the topics.

Country experts for the fifteen selected countries were provided with specific templates to guide (group) interviews in their country, on which they were asked to report. Related to the topics and the evaluation questions, the country experts were asked to tailor the questions and sub-questions to their national context and the stakeholder groups, and to provide a checklist of questions to the interviewees in the national language prior to the interview/group interview. The findings, as reported by the country experts, were then analysed by the core team, who brought all inputs together in a synthetic description of each of the ten themes.

**Table 18. Overview of stakeholders targeted during case studies**

Stakeholders Data		Total	Countries														
			CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI
Number of stakeholders		131	7	5	10	7	6	5	3	8	16	9	2	15	15	8	5
Type	Public Authority	20	1	3	1	1	0	1	0	6	2	0	0	1	0	1	3
	Authority working with qualifications	44	5	2	3	3	2	4	6	2	5	4	1	4	0	3	0
	Education and training provider	41	1	0	2	1	4	0	6	0	6	3	0	4	9	3	2
	End beneficiary representative	20	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	6	6	1	0
	Other	6	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Interviewee vs. group interview	Interviewee	99	7	5	10	7	2	5	3	8	11	6	2	6	5	8	5
	Group interviews	31	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	5	3	0	9	10	0	0

Notes: Only two stakeholders were consulted during consultations in Portugal. This is because the case study mainly focused on factual information (e.g. databases, credit systems), which means that the insights gained from the respondent responsible for this are sufficient. The central reforms discussed date back to 2007, with only minor changes over 5 years ago, thus it would be difficult to probe reflections on the system from other stakeholders (employers/unions).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

### Public consultation

The objective of the PC was to gather opinions from all stakeholders (but particularly those less directly involved in the EQF implementation process and/or active users of the EQF), and gain additional insights on the situation overall and in different countries. The PC was launched on December 14 and was open for responses in the European Commission 'Have your say' portal until March 22.

The invitation to participate in the PC was distributed by the European Commission through the network of EQF AG members and other relevant expert and stakeholder groups (DG EMPL Policy Networks, ESCO stakeholders, groups, and networks of VET providers, such as ACVT, EQAVET, National coordinators for adult learning, Pact for Skills members, the European Union's Employment Committee and Education Committee). In addition, the communication campaign about the PC was launched through social media (LinkedIn and Twitter), by the European Commission and the study team.

In total 267 responses were received. The PC responses were analysed in the following breakdowns:

- Type of respondents differentiating between holders of qualification(s) (i.e. learners, graduates, jobseekers, workers), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients, etc. Different groups of stakeholders use the EQF for



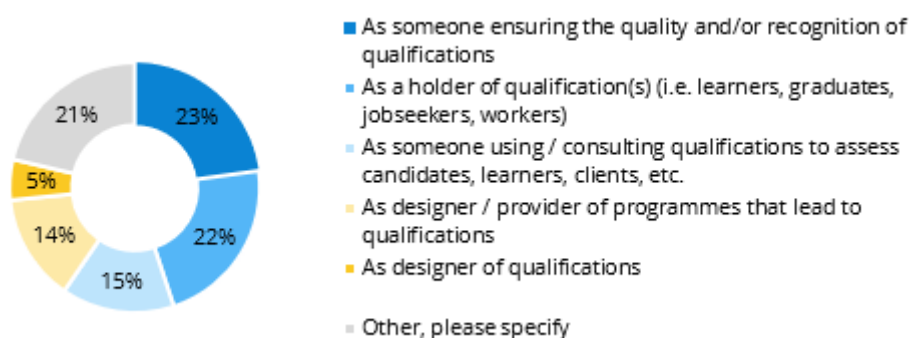
different reasons and to a different extent, thus, they might have different perceptions about the topic.

- Respondent country groups differentiating between EU countries, non-EU EQF countries, and non-EQF countries. Different regulatory framework in these group of countries could have an impact on respondents' perceptions about the EQF.
- Size of the country differentiating between small (population up to 10m), medium (population between 10-30 m), and large (population larger than 30m) countries to check if respondents from larger and smaller countries could have different perceptions about EQF.
- Respondent country groups differentiating between countries that referenced their qualification framework or system to EQF by the end of 2017 (before the year of 2017 EQF Recommendation), and countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2017. The time of referencing to EQF might have impact on the extent to which EQF is implemented and used in the country leading to different perceptions about EQF.
- Going beyond 2017 as a baseline it is interesting to check how countries that referenced their qualifications to EQF at the beginning differ from the ones that referenced later. The year of 2012 was selected as a cut-off point, as the previous EQF evaluation took into account the period between 2008 and 2012.

Looking at the type of respondents, of 267 almost a quarter of respondents (61 or 23%) identified themselves as someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualification. This is followed by respondents identifying themselves as a holder of qualification(s) (59 or 22%). Slightly fewer respondents reply to this questionnaire as someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, or clients (39 or 15%), or as a designer/provider of programmes that lead to qualifications (37 or 14%). Finally, only 14 or 5% of respondents identified themselves as a designer of qualification.

Among the 57 or 21% of respondents who selected other options, there were national agencies representatives, academics, consultants, SME organisations, trade unions representatives, education officers, Erasmus+ agencies, VET and HE experts, and others.

**Figure 21. In what capacity are you replying to this questionnaire?**

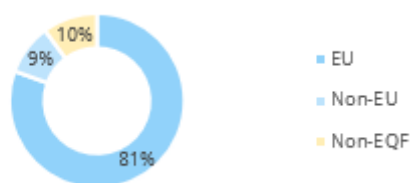


Note: Total (N)=267.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

The majority (215 or 81%) of individuals who participated in the PC were from EU countries, while 25 or 9% were non-EU, and 27 or 10% were non-EQF countries.

**Figure 22. Respondents' distribution (EU vs non-EU vs non-EQF countries)**

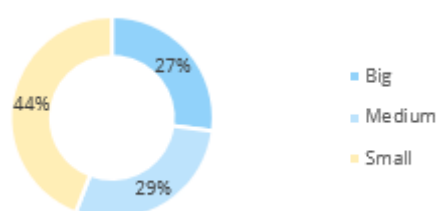


Note: Total (N)=267.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

The majority of the respondents were from small countries (106 or 44%), while the rest were divided almost equally from medium (69 or 29%) and big (65 or 27%) countries.

**Figure 23. Respondents' distribution (size of the country)**

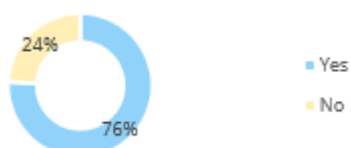


Note: Total (N)=240.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

166 or 76% of respondents were from the countries that have referenced their QF to EQF by the end of 2017, while a quarter (53 or 24%) were from the countries that have not referenced their QF to EQF by the end of 2017.

**Figure 24. Respondents' distribution (has the country referenced during baseline (by the end of 2017))**

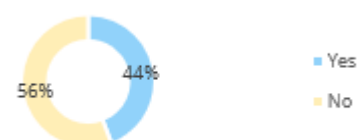


Note: Total (N)=219.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

Slightly less than a half of respondents (97 or 44%) were from countries that have referenced their QF to EQF by the end of 2012. The rest (122 or 56%) were from the countries that have not referenced by the end of 2012.

**Figure 25. Respondents' distribution (has the country referenced by the end of 2012)**



Note: Total (N)=219.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

In addition, 17 responses were received to call for evidence for an evaluation (15 through 'Have your say' platform and two directly to dedicated email). National authorities, non-

governmental organisations (NGOs), business associations, and businesses, as well as citizens from ten countries<sup>300</sup>, responded to call for evidence for an evaluation of the PC.

## Validation workshop

As part of the study, an online validation workshop was organised on April 17, 2023. The workshop aimed to present and validate the findings of the study and to discuss study lessons learnt, as well as future perspective of the EQF with key EQF stakeholders.

The validation workshop brought together 25 representatives of EU- and national level stakeholders and experts on qualifications from 13 countries. These included:

- four EU level agencies and associations (in the fields of (higher) education and training, trades and SMEs, and volunteering);
- five national level stakeholders representing their respective ministries of education, science, culture, civil affairs, and research;
- three national agencies for higher or vocational education or academic information centres
- three representatives of national qualification authorities and agencies,
- two NCP (Czechia and the Netherlands) representatives and one EQF AG representative (Ukraine)

At the beginning, the study team presented key conclusions and lessons learnt, giving participants the opportunity to provide feedback and ask questions. After that, the workshop discussed lessons learnt and the future perspective of the EQF, allowing participants to provide contributions. The workshop participants were divided into two different breakout groups, in which different participants with diverse backgrounds discussed the same topics regarding the **2017 EQF Recommendation**.

The following questions were discussed:

- What is needed to make sure that the European approach to qualifications remains relevant in the next 10 years?
- What operational objectives would you suggest for the EQF to work on in the coming years (consider for instance attention for new themes, new ambitions for referencing, aim to expand NQFs, link to international frameworks, revise approach to learning outcomes, other)?
- How could such objectives be best achieved (type of legislative instrument, i.e. current or new Recommendation, better link to/integrate with other initiatives)?
- What can be the role of end beneficiaries when revising the approach to EQF/NQF?

The validation workshop provides input for the Commission evaluation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and contributes to revisions in relation to study findings and lessons learnt in the final study report.

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<sup>300</sup> Austria; Belgium; Denmark; France; Germany; Italy; Netherlands; Slovakia; Spain; Sweden.

## Limitations of the study and mitigation measures

There were a number of limitations associated with the study objective and its scope (conceptual limitations), as well as data collection and stakeholder engagement. These limitations were taken into account in the design and implementation of the study, as outlined in the table below.

**Table 19. Key limitations of the research**

Limitation	Mitigation measures taken
<b>Conceptual limitations</b>	
The 2017 EQF Recommendation was a continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. As a result, it is not always possible to attribute some of the impacts only to the 2017 EQF Recommendation even though the study aimed to do so.	In instances where it was not possible to attribute impacts only to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the study assessed impacts of the EQF as a whole. The study clearly stated when it discusses impacts of 2017 EQF Recommendation and when it discusses impacts of EQF as a whole. This is mainly the case when assessing recommendations from the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which are continuation or codification of the 2008 EQF Recommendation.
The study focused on analysing the 2017 EQF Recommendation and, thus, its scope is limited to the EQF tool. However, it is not possible to disentangle the EQF from NQFs completely. The EQF and NQFs are interconnected because each NQF should be linked to the EQF. Thus, the EQF cannot exist without NQFs, as the EQF provides a common language and a reference point for NQFs. As a result, EQF heavily relies on the quality and accuracy of the NQFs. Hence, it was challenging for the study team to assess EQF without going into detail about each NQF.	Where relevant, the study also went beyond the scope of EQF and discussed NQFs. In addition, where a clear impact of the EQF could not be assessed, this was clearly stated in the analysis.
The 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives are currently defined in a way that they cannot be measured. This makes it difficult to say to what extent its wider and specific objectives were achieved (e.g. it is not clear what it means to fully achieve the specific objective “facilitating lifelong learning” without a clear link to an operational objective or a monitoring indicator).	An attempt to provide qualifiers as to full extent, to a large extent, to a small extent, etc., where possible, was made. Stakeholder perception, where relevant, were also used to provide qualifiers.
<b>Data collection and stakeholder engagement limitations</b>	
The desk research and country mapping mostly studied country referencing reports, EQF AG notes, Cedefop and ETF reports (including Cedefop NQF inventory), as these reports monitor EQF developments across the participating countries. For example, all EQF AG notes are accompanied with an overview of national developments, including an overview of whether countries referenced their NQF to the EQF. Often, this overview is accompanied by a concise overview of information on the implementation of the EQF at national levels. However, these overviews provide factual information and do not present stakeholder views or grasp national particularities. This is covered by case studies. Hence, our analysis provides a deep dive into the national context of 15 case study countries, while information about the national particularities for the remaining countries are less detailed and mostly based on EU level reports.	Results of desk research and mapping from all EQF countries were analysed together with insights from case studies covering 15 countries. Relying on insights from case studies the study team tried to draw an overarching hypothesis and conclusion about the remaining EQF countries, triangulating them with the data from desk research, mapping, and other consultation activities. In instances where this was not possible, country case studies were used to illustrate concrete findings instead of drawing overarching conclusions, as the overarching conclusion is coming from other methods.
The EQF of this complex subject requiring good knowledge of the field of education and training and qualifications. Hence, there is a limited number of stakeholders that can provide feedback about its effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance. In addition,	The study team designed the questionnaire using common language, provided definitions to achieve a uniform interpretation of questions, aimed to keep the questions direct, short, and clear, and used skip logic so that respondents would see only questions relevant to them. Despite these efforts, the survey

Limitation	Mitigation measures taken
different people have knowledge about different aspects of the EQF.	was challenging to complete from a respondent perspective. Some responses were completed in groups to provide informative and well-founded responses. Even under these circumstances 122 responses were received. The responses received have value added, as they were received from key stakeholders (mostly public authorities, but also end beneficiaries and education and training providers), and across most of the EQF countries.
Self-selection bias in the surveys. Respondents who know EQF were more likely to respond to the survey and PC. Hence, questions about awareness were likely not representative to the views of the general population.	This was taken into account in the analysis while interpreting results of survey and PC.
The existing sources provide limited evidence to assess the costs associated with running the NCPs and supporting the implementing of the EQF at national level.	Some information about costs were collected during the targeted online survey and interviews. In addition, due to limited data, the costs were not quantified in most cases and categories of costs with explanation of cost drivers were provided instead.

## Annex 2. Case study reports

This annex presents 10 case study reports. The case studies aimed to provide a more in-depth analysis of the state of implementation of the activities related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In particular, they helped to:

- Highlight experiences with the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value and relevance of specific activities under the 2017 EQF Recommendation;
- Understand how different national contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Based on a careful assessment of the available sources to answer the evaluation questions and the identification of gaps in the available information, 10 study topics were identified. Table 20 below provides an overview of the case study topics and case study countries. The case study topics were selected to address the evaluation questions, to cover topics in relation to new aspects of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, or to cover areas of the Recommendation where there has been less progress, in order to better explain why this is the case.

In particular, topics providing evidence for evaluation questions related to the implementation of key provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation addressed to Member States (Review and update the referencing (covered by case study 1); Quality assurance; Credit systems; Databases and registers (covering reference to EQF levels and availability of referencing process results); Communication, outreach and encouraging use of EQF). In addition, more overarching topics were selected (Comparability and portability of qualifications; Conditions for lifelong learning; Third country qualifications and migration; Efficiency; Relevance).

10 case studies covering 15 countries were implemented. The case studies did not aim to be representative of all EQF countries, but were intended to showcase and illustrate differences between countries within a wider perspective than is provided through other research methods (country mapping, desk research, targeted online survey (hereafter: survey), public consultation (hereafter: PC)). As a general rule, the allocation of countries to specific case topics aimed to maintain diversity in background characteristics per case. For some case studies, specific countries were selected based on developments related to the case study topic in this country.

**Table 20. Assigning countries to case study topics**

	CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI	Total
1. Comparability and portability of qualifications		1		1		1	1								1	5
2. Facilitating lifelong learning with the EQF	1					1	1		1	1			1			6
3. Reforms in E&T		1			1	1							1		1	5
4. Quality assurance		1							1						1	3
5. Credit systems						1	1				1					3
6. Databases and registers					1		1	1			1	1		1		6
7. Communication, outreach and encouraging use of EQF	1		1				1		1			1	1		1	7
8. Third country qualifications and migration		1		1						1			1	1		5
9. Efficiency: costs associated with running the NCP and implementing the EQF			1						1	1					1	4
10. Relevance: future of the EQF against the context of the twin transition and future						1		1			1	1		1		5

	CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI	Total
challenges to the labour market																
Total number of themes per country	2	4	2	2	3	4	5	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	5	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The core team was responsible for the preparation of all case studies, including the overall desk research on each theme, and the overarching analysis and formulation of conclusions. This European-level desk research gathered existing evidence from academic and grey sources on the key topics pre-selected for the case studies. The desk research included a European perspective and a broad country mapping across all countries. Selected national experts were responsible for gathering data at national level through desk research, interviews and/or group interviews. Interviews and/or group interviews targeted 131 people in total (see table below for the distribution of respondents per country, group, and method of interaction).

**Table 21. Overview of stakeholders targeted during case studies**

Stakeholders Data	Total	Countries															
		CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI	
Number of stakeholders	131	7	5	10	7	6	5	13	8	16	9	2	15	15	8	5	
Type	Public Authority	20	1	3	1	1	0	1	0	6	2	0	0	1	0	1	3
	Authority working with qualifications	44	5	2	3	3	2	4	6	2	5	4	1	4	0	3	0
	Education and training provider	41	1	0	2	1	4	0	6	0	6	3	0	4	9	3	2
	End beneficiary representative	20	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	6	6	1	0
	Other	6	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Interviewee vs. group interview	Interviewee	99	7	5	10	7	2	5	13	8	11	6	2	6	5	8	5
	Group interviews	31	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	5	3	0	9	10	0	0

Notes: Only two stakeholders were consulted during consultations in Portugal. This is because the case study mainly focused on factual information (e.g. databases, credit systems), which means that the insights gained from the respondent responsible for this are sufficient. The central reforms discussed date back to 2007, with only minor changes over 5 years ago, thus, it would be difficult to probe reflections on the system from other stakeholders (employers/unions).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

National experts for the 15 selected countries were provided with specific templates to guide (group) interviews in their country, on which they were asked to report. Related to the topics and the evaluation questions, the national experts were asked to tailor the questions and sub-questions to their national context and the stakeholder groups. In addition, national experts were to provide a checklist of questions to the interviewees in the national language prior to the (group) interview. The findings, as reported by national experts, were then analysed by the core team, who brought all of the inputs together in a synthetic description of each of the 10 themes. It must be noted that country case study results, as reported by national experts, were not reported by stakeholder groups. National experts only indicated significant disagreements among the different consulted stakeholder groups if these were present. Therefore, if no disagreements among the different stakeholder groups are reported in the country case study results, this indicates that no significant differences among the consulted stakeholders' views were identified. This means that it is not possible to break down the opinions of different stakeholder groups for further analysis in the cases where no significant disagreements were identified.

## Case study topic 1: Transparency, comparability, and portability of qualification

This case study analyses to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving its objectives in terms of improving the transparency, comparability, and

portability of qualifications at national- and European-levels, also by building trust and by facilitating the understanding and recognition of qualifications. Related to this question, the case study focuses on the effects of the EQF referencing and updates, how these contributed to opening up systems, improving transparency, trust, and cooperation between countries, how these have improved comparability of qualifications, and what could be improved in terms of making qualifications more comparable<sup>301</sup>. This case study, therefore, looks at what impact referencing, and the use of referencing criteria, has played at national- and European-level (section 2), and the wider impact of the Recommendation on facilitating transparency, comparability, and portability (section 3).

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. For this case study, five in-depth country reviews have been conducted, covering France, Ireland, Germany, Spain, and Slovenia. In total, 35 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic<sup>302</sup>. Among the 35 interviewees, eight represented public authorities, 15 – authorities working with qualifications, nine – education and training providers, two – end beneficiaries and the remaining one – other EQF stakeholder (association advising on recognition of qualifications representative).

The five countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the type of skills-formation system, the development stage of the NQF, whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review<sup>303</sup>. More specifically on the topic of this case study, two countries referenced and completed an update (France (2010, update 2021), Ireland (2009, update 2020)), two countries completed the referencing (Germany (2012), Slovenia (2013)), and one country is in the process of referencing (Spain). Furthermore, France and Ireland have longstanding qualifications frameworks, where trust and transparency have had time to develop, whereas Germany, Slovenia, and Spain have developed their qualifications frameworks more recently. In those countries, trust and transparency are still developing and maturing.

### Referencing as improving transparency and comparability of qualifications

This section aims to answer the questions of whether the referencing criteria and process contributed to opening up systems, improving transparency, trust, and cooperation between countries; whether it has improved comparability of qualifications; and finally, what could be further improved in this regard. To answer these questions, the study analyses whether key stakeholders see that the referencing of NQFs to the EQF contributes to higher levels of transparency, trust, and cooperation between countries; whether more comparative studies are conducted, enabled by the EQF as a reference point, serving different objectives – scientific (e.g. establish trends, design training content) and practical (to design mobility experience, for recognition); and finally, whether key stakeholders see that the application of the referencing process has improved comparability of qualifications.

By bringing together the evidence from the desk research, country mapping, survey, and country case studies, a more complete picture emerges on whether referencing NQFs to the EQF contributes to higher levels of transparency, trust, and cooperation between countries; to what extent the referencing process has improved comparability of qualifications; and what areas could be further improved in this regard.

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<sup>301</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ 1 (1.1); EQ5 (5.2a, 5.2b, 5.2c).

<sup>302</sup> See more details on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview of the type of organisations consulted.

<sup>303</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.



In **conclusion**, the referencing criteria and overall approach to referencing and updating the referencing have led to visible changes at national level supporting better comparability of qualifications, transparency of education and training systems and trust between education and training systems. Moreover, they are facilitating trust, comparability, and transparency between countries. Given that between 2017-2022 more countries referenced and updated their referencing reports and that countries are increasingly moving towards comprehensive frameworks, the comparability, transparency, and trust have increased. Nonetheless, the referencing process could further strengthen trust by stimulating the use of more consistent descriptions of learning outcomes and identifiable levelling processes and improving transparency on social/contextual considerations in the levelling and on levelling procedures used. In addition, trust could be improved through more awareness-raising and communication about NQF/EQF, to trickle down trust from experts and policy makers to end beneficiaries of qualifications.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

By 2017, 35 NQFs had already been referenced to the EQF (26 NQFs in the EU and eight NQFs outside the EU), on the basis of the referencing criteria that were defined by the Advisory Group (AG) in 2011 and updated in 2013<sup>304</sup>. These identical referencing criteria are now explicitly included in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. After 2017, three more countries completed the referencing (Romania, Serbia, Albania). In terms of updating, while not foreseen by the 2008 EQF Recommendation, by 2017, a total of three updates had been shared with the AG (Belgium [FL], Estonia, Malta). Since 2017, a total of five EQF countries and all qualification frameworks in the United Kingdom<sup>305</sup> reviewed and updated the referencing of levels (France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, United Kingdom)<sup>306</sup>. Hence, almost all countries referenced their system to the EQF, and some updated the referencing process.

The use of the referencing criteria aimed to build trust in the quality of referencing and to strengthen the trust that qualifications in one country are comparable to qualifications obtained at the same level in another country. Applying the referencing criteria should hence contribute to trust, more transparency, and comparability.

Among survey respondents involved in referencing, the large majority (24 out of 33 or 73%) see current referencing criteria as fully adequate to ensure transparency, trust, and cooperation. Seven out of 33 (21%) think that the criteria are somewhat adequate. There are no respondents who doubt the referencing criteria.

### Assessment

Concerning whether the referencing criteria impacted transparency, comparability, and trust between countries, since 2017, in essence only the developments in the three countries that completed the referencing after 2017 (Romania, Serbia, Albania), and the six countries that updated the referencing (France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, United Kingdom), should be taken into account, as these formally applied the criteria as included in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. However, in reality, the referencing criteria are identical with the note presented in 2011 and 2013 and hence are applied in most referencing reports. Whether the referencing criteria contributed to transparency, comparability, and portability

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<sup>304</sup> European Union (2011), Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (Note 3) and European Union (2013), [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>305</sup> Separate reports for Scotland, Wales, and England/Northern Ireland. Note that these total are not included in the tables, as the UK withdrew from the EU in January 2020, and also left the EQF process.

<sup>306</sup> Instead of referring to an update of the EQF referencing, the UK and Irish reports used the term re-referencing, to express the fact that the whole referencing process has been redone. In the context of this report the term “updating” is used, as term used in the EQF Recommendation.

can be asked in relation to the overall referencing and updating process in the majority of countries.

### The role of referencing and its effects

At national level, stakeholder interviews indicate that the referencing process to the EQF had a major impact on national systems. In **Germany**, interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities and authorities working with qualifications), agreed that the most important effect of the EQF and the referencing of the German Qualifications Framework (DQR) was twofold. Firstly, the increased focus on learning outcomes is seen, as the greatest paradigm shift caused by the referencing process, of which effects are already visible in the design of curricula. Comparative studies using the EQF as a reference point are used by some respondents, mostly for research, to gain information, and they are disseminated via the DQR portal. Other respondents rely on their personal EQF networks and prefer direct contact with Member States. The EQF serves as a reference point for the design of curricula. Secondly, the referencing led to reaching a consensus on the equivalence of VET and HE. The referencing has caused a mindset shift and subsequently triggered changes in education policy. Another (side) effect of the referencing, as indicated by interviewees, is that with the allocation of three continuing vocational education and training (CVET) qualifications to the NQF a new perspective emerged on CVET. Through this, financial support for CVET was substantially increased in 2016 and 2019<sup>307</sup>. The EQF and the referencing process have influenced the comparability between qualifications from different education systems in an indirect way, by adding pressure and dynamics on the DQR. From that perspective it is difficult to imagine the DQR functioning without the EQF. The EQF has a corrective function for social partners, by widening the view. Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) and the Europass portal were mentioned as other tools which contribute to improving transparency and trust. Overall, the DQR and the referencing to the EQF have improved trust and cooperation within Germany, in particular across education sectors. In **Slovenia**, based on the stakeholders' (including public authorities and education and training providers) discussion, the main effects that can be observed as a result of EQF referencing at national level refer to easier access to information about qualifications at national level and within EU (and some non-EU) countries; improved possibilities to compare qualifications at national level within EU (and some non-EU) countries; and increased understanding and trust of qualifications at national level and within EU (and some non-EU) countries. In **Spain**, the approval of the Spanish Qualifications Framework (MECU) is still too recent to be able to observe its impact.

In addition, anecdotal evidence provided by interviewed **German** national stakeholders suggests that comparability has increased at international level. For instance, for outgoing labour force, an automotive business in the People's Republic of China [name was mentioned by the respondent] uses the EQF and the DQR in recruiting, for levelling the qualifications of German workers.

Hence, effects of referencing can be observed in bringing education and training sectors together, assuring parity of esteem of qualifications, supporting curriculum design (applying learning outcomes and the use of level descriptors), improving access to information on qualifications, comparability of qualifications both in the country and between countries and finally, strengthening trust in qualifications.

### The role of updating and its effects

Survey respondents, involved in referencing, indicate that updating the referencing should be conducted firstly, when the structure, levels, or level descriptors in the NQF change (17 out of 33 or 52%), or when the scope of the NQF changes (16 out of 33 or 48%). The other half of respondents instead suggested that such updates are only necessary whenever the

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<sup>307</sup> Governed by the Upgrading Training Assistance Act – AFBG (Aufstiegsfortbildungsförderungsgesetz, or Aufstiegs-BaföG)

country deems it relevant (16 out of 33 or 48%). This shows different interpretations of the necessity for having objective criteria in determining the need for updating referencing.

Only France and Ireland provide illustrations on how updating the referencing report is positioned in increasing mainly the international comparability and transparency, but also stimulates national level reflections on the national qualifications systems.

**Ireland's** re-referencing report was published in December 2020. Referencing is regarded as an opportunity to challenge the idea that NQFs are fixed, when in fact they are dynamic. Review and update are key words in relation to the re-referencing process. The process was deep, and several preliminary/prior studies were conducted to support it. Re-referencing was linked by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to the preparation of a Green Paper on the Qualifications System (and accompanying Technical Paper), which posed some broad questions about how the system might be enhanced.<sup>308</sup> Referencing and updates are seen as a valuable opportunity to reflect on the NFQ systematically through a European lens – i.e. it brings an alternative perspective, with the role of international experts being particularly welcomed. It was also an opportunity to consider the NFQ in relation to the European frameworks for both HE and lifelong learning, which has supported domestic policies around opening up systems, improving transparency, trust, and cooperation between education sectors.

After referencing its NQF to the EQF in 2010, **France** started reforming its NQF and related arrangements (e.g. personal training accounts, validation of prior learning, certification blocs, etc.). This resulted in a new law adopted in 2018, which in 2019 established a new agency for managing the NQF, *France Compétence*. *France Compétence* launched the referencing process for the revised NQF, which was finalised in February 2021, when France presented its referencing report to the EQF AG. The re-referencing report describes in detail how France implemented the referencing criteria (Annex III). The referencing process 2019-2021 did not lead to any further reforms in France as such. It can rather be described as an ex-post “explanation process”, by which the reforms adopted in 2018 were presented to the other Member States and by which the links between the NQF and the EQF were officially identified. The main benefit of the re-referencing process is perceived by interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities and authorities working with qualifications), to lie in the enhanced transparency towards other Member States. Referencing criteria were said to be helpful in order to structure the report and make things explicit. A seminar with ENIC-NARIC dedicated to the French NQF after the referencing process was reported to have also contributed to enhancing the understanding for and trust in the French NQF from the side of other Member States.

The effects of updating relate to critically reflecting on the NQF from a European perspective, to update the NQF to the changing national context, and to improve transparency of the national system to other countries. As illustrated by the French reflections on the updating, the referencing criteria and feedback process were felt conducive to stimulating critical reflections and making implicit characteristics of the French system explicit.

### Factors preventing referencing leading to transparency and comparability

While interviewed national stakeholders, including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries, refer (mostly) to the effects of referencing on national systems, they also refer to challenges hindering the referencing process leading to transparency and comparability of qualifications between countries. Four specific issues are highlighted: levelling methods and descriptions of

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<sup>308</sup> ‘A Green Paper is a discussion document, usually written by civil servants, in which an issue is outlined, various options are suggested, and the advantages and disadvantages of those options may be set out.’ Green Papers may or may not lead to legislative proposals.

[https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving\\_country/moving\\_to\\_ireland/introduction\\_to\\_the\\_irish\\_system/political\\_system.html](https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving_country/moving_to_ireland/introduction_to_the_irish_system/political_system.html)

qualifications, practical trust in levelled qualifications, incomplete or outdated NQFs, and visibility of NQF/EQF.

Firstly, there are different ways to level qualifications, both within and across countries. Such differences are considered by national stakeholders in the in-depth country reviews to reduce trust in levelling decisions. Often, qualifications in the formal education and training systems are levelled as a group, while for qualifications outside the formal systems a more detailed method is applied. The group referencing, as indicated by some German national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), does not allow for the precise allocation of qualifications. Cedefop studies confirm this challenge, indicating that firstly, the social and contextual considerations differ per country and education sector influencing levelling decisions, and, secondly, the levelling procedures as such differ between countries for different types of qualification from different segments of the qualifications system (e.g. technical/linguistic vs. social/political approaches), challenging the comparability of qualifications, transparency, and trust. Furthermore, the descriptions of learning outcomes differ in terms of length, level of detail and abstraction, structure, and inclusion of types of learning outcomes (occupational outcomes, transversal outcomes, general knowledge subjects), also hindering comparisons of qualifications<sup>309</sup>.

Secondly, completing the referencing or updating process does not necessarily support easing the recognition of qualifications included in NQFs abroad. This is important to highlight, as the referencing process is not designed with recognition in mind. Referencing or updating is about entire qualifications systems, while recognition tends to be limited to individual qualifications. Particularly when looking at non-state regulated qualifications, referencing alone may not provide sufficient insights in qualifications to support recognition. In France for instance, qualifications registered in the National Register of Vocational and Professional Qualifications (RNCP) are not considered to be “non-formal”, and they have full parity of esteem with qualifications issued within the state-regulated education and training system. While this is usually accepted and understood in Anglophone countries, some countries, such as Belgium or Germany, do not fully recognise these qualifications within the education system or on the labour market, when it comes to tariff agreements for instance. ENIC-NARIC France reported problems encountered by students who had studied in France at private business schools to have their higher education qualifications recognised in their home countries (especially Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Norway). Examples were cited from Bachelor’s and Masters of Business Administration delivered by business schools affiliated to French Chambers of Trade and Industry, level 6 and 7, in the French NQF. These qualifications have a recognised value on the French labour market and are registered in the RNCP. The majority of respondents to the survey (mainly public authorities) also point to this issue, and underline that having NQFs only covering (parts of) the formal education sector limit the comparability of qualifications across and within countries (92 out of 118 respondents or 78%). Having NQFs that are not comprehensive reduce comparability and trust in the whole approach.

Thirdly, while referencing and updating processes can convince policy makers and experts involved and gain trust in levelling decisions, this trust does not trickle down to end beneficiaries. Lack of awareness of the EQF and the limited visibility of the EQF on EU websites and in national communication contributes to lower levels of trust from end beneficiaries, as indicated by the national stakeholders in the five in-depth country studies interviewed for this case study. Ensuring up-to-date referencing is also considered an important prerequisite to convince stakeholders. In the survey, for instance, 68 out of 118 respondents (58%), mainly consisting of public authorities, indicated that having outdated referencing poses a risk to the functioning of the EQF.

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<sup>309</sup> Cedefop (2020). European qualifications framework. Initial vocational education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper; No 77. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/114528>

All in all, more consistent descriptions of learning outcomes, the use of transparent levelling procedures and transparency on social/contextual considerations in the levelling and on levelling procedures used, more awareness-raising and communication about NQF/EQF are considered important factors that make up the transparency and comparability of qualifications.

### EQF Recommendation facilitating transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications

While section 2 focused specifically on the role of the referencing process in improving transparency and trust, this section zooms out to assess the extent to which the 2017 EQF Recommendation facilitated transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications, contributing to achieving the objectives of the Recommendation at national- and European-level by building trust and understanding in qualifications. The analysis brings together the evidence from the desk research, country mapping, the survey, and country case studies.

In **conclusion**, the gathered evidence suggests that the EQF, and with it the learning outcomes approach to describing qualifications, further increased trust, transparency, and comparability. Firstly, stakeholders (both respondents to the survey (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), and interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries)), indicate higher levels of trust and also report on specific effects of the EQF in terms of increased comparability, transparency, and trust both at national- and European-levels, such as better cooperation between education and training sectors, easier understandable training pathways, easier recognition of the level of qualifications abroad. Secondly, more and more detailed comparative studies are carried out on qualifications on specific levels, also defining more practice-oriented use cases for comparative methodologies, e.g. curriculum development, quality assurance, mobility, job profiles. The role of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and the referencing criteria included, is in this regard playing a crucial role as reference point for countries referencing their NQF to the EQF or updating their referencing. Still, further efforts are needed to increase comparability through improving the quality of referencing and updating by reviewing and updating the criteria.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Increased trust, transparency, and comparability have not been consistently measured over the years. There are, however, indications of a relatively high level of trust and transparency in 2017, which can inform a judgment for the subsequent years. In 2018, reflecting on the 2017 publication of the European handbook on learning outcomes<sup>310</sup>, a large majority of countries working on the EQF agreed that the shift to learning outcomes increases overall transparency, and makes it easier to understand and value the content and profile of qualifications<sup>311</sup>. Learning outcomes were felt to allow better description of existing education and training provisions, making it easier for learners and employers to manoeuvre within increasingly complex systems.

By 2022, evidence shows a further increase in trust, transparency, and comparability. This is evidenced by more studies being published that compare qualifications from different countries, and further discuss and reflect on those comparisons with stakeholders. Cedefop for instance launched a number of studies on which specific EQF levels are taken as a starting point for comparison (EQF level 5 (2014), EQF level 3 and 4 (2020)), and further developed this strand of work into comparative methodologies for the analysis of

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<sup>310</sup> Cedefop (2017). Defining, writing, and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/566770>

<sup>311</sup> EQF AG 45-4, p.1.

qualifications, to be used and applied by different beneficiaries<sup>312</sup>. These studies reflect on the conditions for conducting comparative studies and indicate that the EQF, and the developments in describing qualifications in a similar way in terms of learning outcomes, are conditional for identifying national qualifications at a specific level and discuss their characteristics, contents and currencies in the labour market and further learning<sup>313</sup>. Hence, the continuous work of Cedefop on comparing qualifications is evidencing this possibility and the interest from stakeholders to engage in these comparisons<sup>314</sup>. Furthermore, the European Commission and EQF AG work on horizontal comparisons is essential to ensure consistency in levelling and ensuring trust<sup>315</sup>. As the work progressed over time, these horizontal comparisons increasingly focused on the specific utility of such comparisons. In this context, the Cedefop Comparing Qualifications project described a number of 'use cases' of comparative methodologies and analysis<sup>316</sup>. In addition, the discussions on learning outcomes in the EQF AG progressed. While around 2017-2018 the notes deal first and foremost with referencing criteria and learning outcome approaches, in later years the discussions are opened to transparency, micro-credentials, international qualifications, and validation.

The increase in comparative studies by itself serves as indication of the potential of referencing and learning outcomes to better understand systems. Without progress achieved in expressing qualifications as learning outcomes or additional detail reviewed in referencing, the comparative studies that look at specific EQF levels would not have been possible in the same way. Survey respondents involved in referencing further underlined how their involvement in discussing the referencing reports of other countries improved their understanding of other qualification systems; no respondents indicated that they did not improve their understanding with their involvement in the EQF AG, while 45 out of 58 (78%) at least somewhat increased their understanding of other qualification systems.

## Assessment

The respondents of the survey (mainly public authorities) indicate that the EQF increased understanding in national systems and improved comparability of qualifications between countries and education and training systems. The emergence of studies thematising comparing qualifications also supports that the EQF opened-up comparative perspectives. Without a basic level of trust in referencing process (e.g. trust that qualifications are

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<sup>312</sup> See: Cedefop (2014). Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to higher education. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014; Cedefop (2020). European qualifications framework: initial vocational education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 78. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/114528>. Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series, No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766>

<sup>313</sup> Cedefop (2020). European qualifications framework: initial vocational education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 78. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/114528>, p. 116: "This study is made possible by the implementing, in the past decade, of the EQF and the developments in describing qualifications with learning outcomes. Because of these developments, it is possible to identify national qualifications linked to EQF levels 3 and 4 and to discuss their characteristics, learning outcomes and their currencies."

<sup>314</sup> See Cedefop website on comparing qualifications: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/comparing-vet-qualifications> [accessed 10 November 2022]

<sup>315</sup> See EQF AG note AG 47-3 (2018)

<sup>316</sup> Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766>, chapter 3. Purpose 1: Supporting quality, relevance, and excellence of VET qualifications (use case: improving the content and structure of VET qualifications; use case: Improving the relevance of VET qualifications). Purpose 2: Supporting the transferability of learning outcomes and flexible learning pathways in the national and international context (use case: supporting the levelling of VET qualifications; use case: supporting mobility in VET; use case: exploring opportunities for flexible learning pathways; use case: applying for a job in another country with a VET qualification). Purpose 3: Supporting the development of European vocational core profiles (use case: supporting the development of European vocational core profiles).

allocated to the right EQF levels), these comparative exercises would neither be possible, nor accepted by national stakeholders.

### Transparency and comparability of qualifications at national level

At national level, the EQF and NQFs triggered developments that increase the national transparency and comparability of qualifications of different education and training systems. It brought education and training sectors together and fostered more cooperation. There are differences between countries, mostly related to the maturity of NQFs. More mature NQFs tend to show more evidence of impact on comparability, transparency, and trust.

In **Spain**, the Spanish Qualifications Framework (MECU) has been approved in 2022, so there is no practical experience on its impact on transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications.

In countries with operational NQFs (like Germany, Slovenia), the EQF is seen to impact transparency, comparability, and trust at national level, mainly at re-thinking system characteristics and harmonising information on qualifications and making it broadly available. In **Germany** for instance, the provisions in the EQF had a profound impact on the national system and putting in place the NQF. The education system is highly complex and has limited transparency, especially for citizens, and is characterised by a strong separation between educational sectors. According to the interviewed national stakeholders, it is a great achievement of the EQF that stakeholders have started a discussion across education sectors. The work on the German NQF started in 2006/2007, with the first draft of the DQR published in 2009 and the final version endorsed in 2012. Competence orientation, as well as learning outcomes orientation, had been somewhat established in VET before this, while it was new for general and higher education. Therefore, the cross sectoral approach applied in the DQR can be seen as a groundbreaking achievement. It is based on the consensus that qualifications from VET and general education, as well as from VET and higher education, are comparable; more generally described: they are “of similar value, yet not of similar nature” (*Gleichwertigkeit, nicht Gleichartigkeit*)<sup>317</sup>. Furthermore, as indicated by interviewed national stakeholders, the DQR has substantially improved the dialogue between education sectors, in particular between VET and HE. Especially, HE stakeholders have developed a better understanding and appreciation of VET. The principle of strict consensus in the German Qualifications Framework Working Group – AK DQR (*Arbeitskreis Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen*) was crucial for building trust. Each member has a voice and is heard. Hence, trust and mutual understanding have grown on all levels, between education sectors, as well as between the Länder, and was fostered by the cooperation in the DQR working groups. Also in **Slovenia**, the EQF is seen to have impacted the education system. The 2020 evaluation of the Slovenian NQF (SQF)<sup>318</sup>, shows that the SQF users positively evaluate its contribution to the transparency and orderliness of the education system, together with the transparency of qualifications.

In more mature NQFs that updated the referencing report (like Ireland and France), the transparency, comparability, and trust is visible at a more operational-level for end beneficiaries. In **Ireland**, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is widely perceived to have had – and still to be having – a major influence on the transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications in the country. Already in 2017, stakeholders surveyed agreed, to a large extent, that the NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand and has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other. Moreover, stakeholders agreed that qualifications included in the NFQ are highly

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<sup>317</sup> <https://www.dqr.de/dqr/de/der-dqr/glossar/deutscher-qualifikationsrahmen-glossar.html>

<sup>318</sup> Ermenc, K. S., Mikulec, B., & Biloslavo, R. (2020). Evaluation of the Slovenian qualifications framework and the register of qualifications of the SQF (1st ed). Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training: spremljjava\_registersok\_eng\_int.pdf (nok.si)

trusted, nationally, and internationally<sup>319</sup>. Furthermore in 2017, the QQI noted that, since 2003, the NFQ 'has become embedded in how we think and speak about qualifications in Ireland.'<sup>320</sup> This level of trust only increased in recent years, as indicated by interviewed national stakeholders. With regard to trust and understanding between education and training sectors, NFQ/EQF supports dialogue between the Further Education and Training (FET) and HE sectors. The current FET strategy and the latest National Access Plan<sup>321</sup> aimed at establishing equality of access to HE. This led to QQI commissioning a study to determine whether there is a significant difference between the learning associated with the FET Advanced Certificate programme cycle and the HE Higher Certificate programme as implemented at Level 6 on the NFQ (Level 5 EQF), which reveals the way in which the EQF can influence debates. In **France**, the revision of the French qualification framework in 2018<sup>322</sup> seeks to improve transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications within the national context, and between France and other Member States. This is seen for instance in the 2018 reform's expansion of the number of qualifications covered<sup>323</sup> and increased portability of smaller units<sup>324</sup>.

Results from PC show that around half (130 out of 229 or 57%) of respondents (mostly someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications), indicated that in the last five years, they used the EQF to better understand another country's qualification system. PC respondents also thought that it is likely, or very likely, for qualifications from formal education obtained in respondents' country to be recognised by both education and training providers and employers in other EQF countries. However, citizens consulted in PC were not optimistic about recognition of qualifications gained in non-formal education (see more details in figures below). PC respondents across all consulted stakeholder types<sup>325</sup> also provided anecdotal examples of how the EQF facilitated the comparison of (academic) qualifications, for instance by offering end beneficiaries a better understanding of entry requirements of programmes and providing a framework for assessing the level of qualifications in recognition. At the same time, the actual portability of qualifications across borders depends on more than only comparing the level, as it follows extensive national rules and requirements that go beyond learning outcomes.

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<sup>319</sup> Indecon (2017) Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.

[https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ\\_Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ_Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>320</sup> Foreword by QQI in Coles, M. (2017) National Qualifications Frameworks. Reflections and Trajectories. Dublin: QQI

<sup>321</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/>

<sup>322</sup> France referenced its qualification framework to the EQF in 2010, but in 2018 it adopted a new law reforming its qualification framework and the governance of its qualifications system, the law "for freedom to choose one's professional future" from September 5th, 2018. The French qualification system is supported by two directories of qualifications: the national register of vocational and professional qualifications associated with a level (*répertoire national des certifications professionnelles*, RNCP) and the specific register of accreditations and certifications for qualifications complementary to a profession (*répertoire spécifique des certifications et des habilitations*, RS). The framework and the registers are managed by the government agency France Compétence.

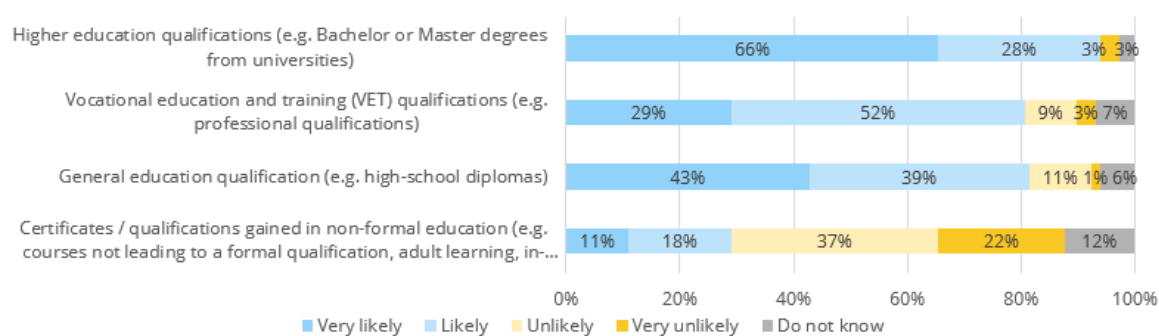
<sup>323</sup> The vocational qualification certificates (*Certificat de Qualifications professionnelle*, CQPs) issued by organisations jointly run by the social partners, previously not featuring any level because their scope was considered to be too narrow, can now be referenced to a specific level in the RNCP. This increases the transparency and comparability of this type of qualifications.

<sup>324</sup> Qualifications are divided into "competence blocs" which can be validated separately and accumulated over time. This reform was introduced in 2014, but it is only in 2018/2019 that a clear definition of competence blocs was included in law, extending the obligation to define competence blocs to all types of qualifications registered in the RNCP.

<sup>325</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include holders of qualification(s), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients.



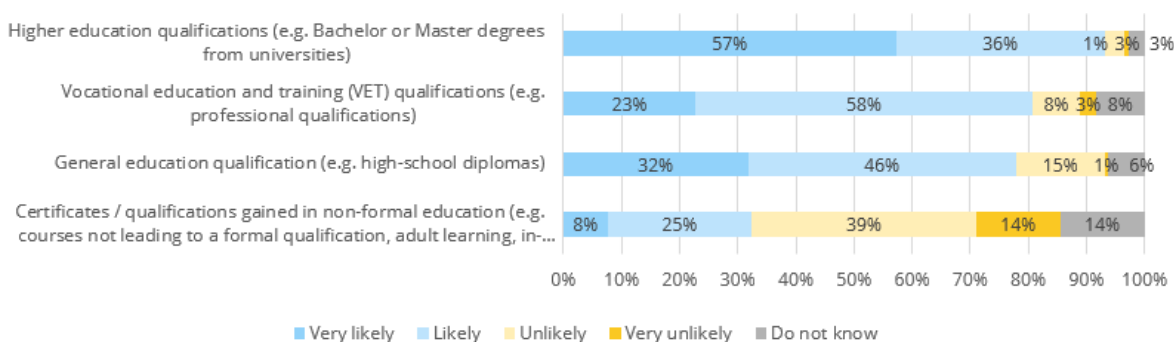
**Figure 26. In your opinion, how likely is it for qualifications obtained in your country to be recognised by education and training providers in other EQF countries?**



Note: Total (N)=145. Question was answered by citizens, local and national organisations

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

**Figure 27. In your opinion, how likely is it for qualifications obtained in one country to be understood and accepted by employers in other EQF countries?**



Note: Total (N)=145. Question was answered by citizens, local and national organisations

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

### Transparency and comparability of qualifications at European-level

At European-level, evidence from some countries also suggests impact of the EQF on transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications between countries. NQFs offer the opportunity for understanding qualifications in different countries and to compare them, but less so to impact on actual portability across borders and international use of comparative perspectives. In **France**, the 2018 NQF reform and the subsequent re-referencing process of the French qualifications system improved the comparability in Europe, by using a similar 8-level structure, applying consistent level descriptors with the EQF, and levelling the entry qualification for higher education at level 4 (*Baccalauréat général*), even if it is not part of the RNCP, because it does not qualify for the labour market. Levelling this qualification was done explicitly to increase the transparency and comparability within the EU. National stakeholders in **Germany** (public authorities and authorities working with qualifications), indicate that the transparency on a European level is fostered through the available national databases. Mobility is fostered through recognition procedures, through EQF working group meetings, through learning from other countries (peer learning), and through the discussion of other countries' referencing reports. PLAs raise trust and understanding between EQF countries. However, the EU comparison tool for national qualifications frameworks<sup>326</sup> is not considered user friendly and therefore not so useful. In **Ireland**, the international dimension of the NQF is considered important, as clearly

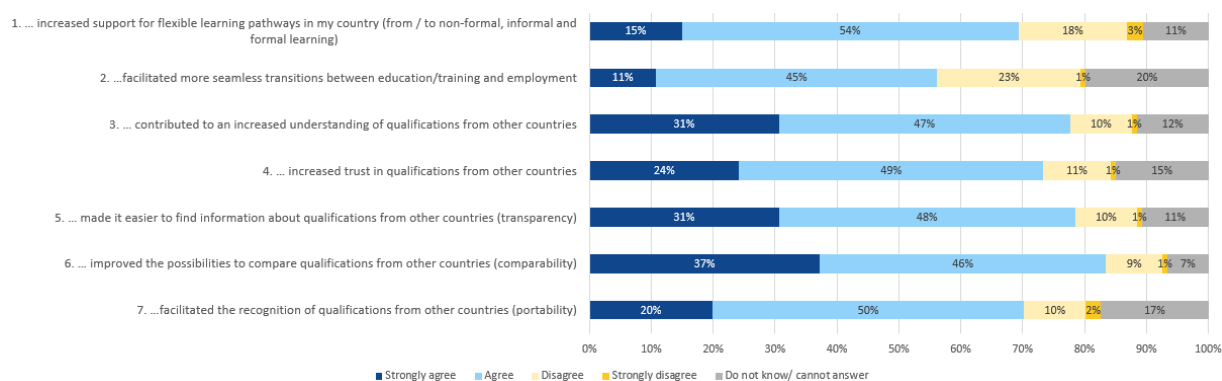
<sup>326</sup> <https://europa.eu/europass/en/compare-qualifications>

stated in the 2020 re-referencing report<sup>327</sup> and evidenced by the bilateral comparisons with non-EQF third countries<sup>328</sup>.

### Impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on transparency and comparability of qualifications

In terms of impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, respondents of the survey and PC (mainly consisting of public authorities and someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), tend to agree more than disagree with all statements in the figures below. Survey respondents mostly agree that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation improved comparability, transparency, and contributed to an increased understanding of qualifications from other countries. Respondents agree the least with the statement that the implementation of 2017 EQF recommendations facilitated more seamless transitions between education and employment. PC respondents agreed the most with the statement that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to an increased understanding of qualifications from other countries, that the 2017 EQF Recommendation made it easier to find information about qualifications from other countries and compare them, as well as that EQF facilitated the recognition of qualifications from other countries. PC respondents were slightly less aware whether the 2017 EQF Recommendation facilitated more seamless transitions between education/training and employment, as well as if EQF increased support for flexible learning pathways in one country. However, the ones who did know evaluated statements more positively than negatively.

**Figure 28. To what extent do you agree or disagree that “the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation...”**



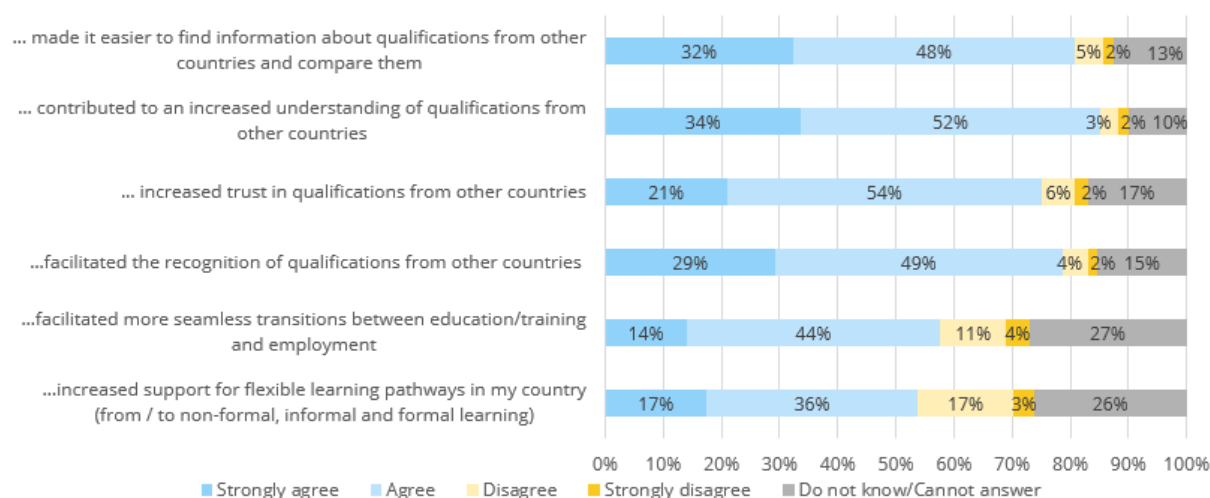
Note: Total(N)=121.

Source: Targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

<sup>327</sup> ‘This report is intended to renew and strengthen the European dimension of the NFQ; to promote the portability and recognition of Irish qualifications in Europe; and to contribute to the broader European agenda for mobility and lifelong learning.’ p.111, QQI (2020) The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/NFQ%20Referencing%20Report%2012-2020.pdf>

<sup>328</sup> New Zealand Qualifications Authority /Mana Tohu M tauranga o Aotearoa and QQI (2019) Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand: a guide <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/comparing-qualifications-in-ireland-and-new-zealand.pdf> ; and Hong Kong Qualifications Framework Secretariat and QQI (2018) Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong: making connections for you <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/comparing-qualifications-in-ireland-and-hong-kong.pdf>

**Figure 29. To what extent do you agree or disagree that “The implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation...”**



Note: Total (N)=229.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

The effect of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as indicated by the survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities), are further substantiated by the national stakeholders interviewed. The country-level assessments however slightly differ between countries from seeing limited impact, to seeing the Recommendation as a key reference point for improving comparability, transparency, and building trust. As **Germany** started early with the development of an NQF, in 2006, the interviewed national stakeholders agree that the 2017 EQF Recommendation was not so important in the ongoing process. The developments have not been as intense since 2017. In **Ireland**, as well, the NFQ, launched in 2003, and learning outcomes predate the EQF. The consensus among interviewed national stakeholders is that Ireland has not been reliant on the EQF to drive developments (e.g. the original referencing did not lead to changes, and the levels have been stable over time). In **Spain**, on the other hand, as the Spanish Qualifications Framework (MECU) was recently adopted in 2022, the influence of the 2017 European Council Recommendation has been crucial for the development of the Spanish Framework, as indicated by the interviewed national stakeholders. The Recommendation facilitated the integration of the Spanish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (MECES), which has existed since 2011, into the MECU. In **France**, the debates about level descriptors, as documented in different drafts and proposals published before the adoption of the Law of 5 September 2018 on the “freedom to choose one’s professional future”, reveal a direct influence of the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations on the reform process and the French qualifications framework. In particular, against first plans, it was decided to introduce a separate category called “Knowledge” – at first, stakeholders argued that knowledge was intrinsically linked to know-how and could not be separated without losing the holistic understanding of “competence” prevailing in the French VET system. Comparability across Europe and transparency were key arguments leading to the adoption of descriptors closely aligned to the EQF<sup>329</sup>.

### Recommendations for improving transparency and comparability

Interviewed national stakeholders, including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries, confirm that the comparability capacity of the EQF relies on the quality of levelling processes nationally, and the quality of referencing processes at EU-level. While they generally agree that the referencing criteria and referencing process works well, the referencing and updating

<sup>329</sup> Sgarzi, M. (2020). French exceptionalism tested against the Lisbon strategy principles. The case of the Qualifications Framework implementation process. In: bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschafts-pädagogik – online, issue 39, 1-16. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi_bwpat39.pdf)

process could benefit from additional improvements. For instance, the reply to reference criteria provided by EQF countries is done in a descriptive way, and do not foresee a formal evaluation. It may be timely to reconsider this and ask how periodic referencing processes can and should generate evidence about the level of implementation, use and impact of EQF in participating countries. This more evaluative approach of EQF referencing could also make use of results from international standardised tests, e.g. OECD PIAAC findings, to compare EQF levels across participating national systems. Another suggestion, raised by interviewees in different countries (and evidenced elsewhere<sup>330</sup>), is to do more on the visibility of learning outcomes and on the format on which they are formulated for public display. Interviewees (from Ireland, Germany, and Slovenia) argued for more transparent, clear, unambiguous, more precise, and consistent rules and guided description of learning outcomes of qualifications.

Furthermore, the emergence of micro-credentials, smaller units, or parts of qualifications that also carry their own currency, requires rethinking of how these units are levelled. Interviewed national stakeholders, in Spain, comment that an exchange of experiences at a European-level would be desirable to establish common or shared criteria for action. One possibility expressed by national stakeholders, in Spain, is that the micro-credentials that are part of a broader curriculum are classified in the levels that correspond to the curriculum to which they are referenced, although they do not give the right to full recognition of the corresponding qualification. In the case of micro-credentials that are not part of a broader curriculum, it will be more difficult to establish their classification.

Cedefop studies on comparing qualifications also bring forward considerations to take on board the review of the referencing process in order to improve comparability of qualifications. Specific recommendations on updating the referencing reports concern<sup>331</sup>:

- Provide transparent information on levelling regulations, procedures, criteria and methods, characteristics of qualifications, or types of qualifications referring to key comparability criteria.
- Focus not only on the mapping of learning outcomes to the NQF descriptors, but also provide evidence related to the output of qualifications, such as their different currency aspects, as well as to achieved learning outcomes.
- Provide some specific examples of qualifications to illustrate levelling procedures and decisions.

Furthermore, a Cedefop study<sup>332</sup> has shown that there are many challenges and ambiguities that need to be addressed to improve comparison. A specific recommendation concerned taking into account contextual factors in the comparison on qualifications, looking at the role qualifications play in linking education and training to the labour market, the extent to which labour market stakeholders are involved in the development of qualifications, and the roles qualifications have in the labour market and for society.

All in all, comparing qualifications can be improved by a number of aspects to improve the re-referencing of NQFs to the EQF; providing more common structures of presenting qualifications; clarify the role of learning outcomes in qualifications and what level of detail

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<sup>330</sup> See: Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766> p. 148: "Further efforts are needed to develop common structures of presenting qualifications in the European context, such as in qualification databases as suggested by the EQF Recommendation)."

<sup>331</sup> Cedefop (2020). European qualifications framework. Initial vocational education and training: focus on qualifications at levels 3 and 4. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper; No 77. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/114528>

<sup>332</sup> Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766>, p. 148-149.

is required; and to take into account contextual factors related to developing learning outcomes of qualifications (learning outcomes are not neutral statements).

## Conclusion and lessons learned

The gathered evidence for this case study suggests that the EQF strengthened the comparability, transparency, and portability of qualifications within countries and between countries. The EQF, supported by the referencing criteria and process, also provides trust in the levelling decisions, serving as foundation for comparison, transparency, and portability. The 2017 EQF Recommendation, in this regard, is not seen as strongly impacting the referencing process, as the criteria included were already in use since 2011 and updated in 2013. The Recommendation, however, did serve as a reference point for countries being at the design or development stage of their NQF, supporting the drafting of the referencing report and levelling decisions.

The evidence, however, also suggests that there is need for new momentum in building trust, by rethinking the referencing criteria, referencing process and to evaluate instead of only describing the levelling decisions. While there is general trust between countries on the decisions made, as presented in their referencing reports, to apply those decisions in practice (apply comparisons for specific use cases), still requires additional action. This includes streamlining the descriptions of learning outcomes, making transparent information on levelling decisions, provide standardised information about the outputs of qualifications (currency on the labour market and for further learning).

## Case study topic 2: Facilitating lifelong learning with the EQF

This case study analyses to what extent conditions for lifelong learning improved through EQF/NQF developments (inclusion of non-formal qualifications and validation of learning approaches), and the extent to which NQFs referenced to the EQF have come to include additional (types of) qualifications since 2017<sup>333</sup>. Improving the conditions for lifelong learning is closely related to the comprehensiveness of the EQF/NQFs. Including more qualifications, also those offered outside the formal system, and describing them in terms of learning outcomes, improves the comparability of qualifications and fosters permeability of, and transitions between, education and training systems. This case study therefore looks at whether the EQF evolved as a comprehensive framework, whether NQFs included more levels, more education and training sectors, more qualifications (section 2), and how non-formal learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by the EQF and NQFs, and whether this led to increased participation in lifelong learning (section 3).

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. The case study draws upon the in-depth country reviews in Czechia, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Serbia. In total, 47 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic. In addition, 18 persons were consulted during group interviews in the Netherlands, Poland, and Serbia<sup>334</sup>. Among these 65 stakeholders consulted, four represent public authorities, 24 – authorities working with qualifications, 25 – education and training providers, 11 – end beneficiaries, and the remaining one – other EQF stakeholder (National Centre for Climate Change representative).

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<sup>333</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ 1 (1.2); EQ5 (5.1a, 5.4).

<sup>334</sup> See more details on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview of the type of organisations consulted.

The six countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the type of skills-formation system, the development stage of the NQF, and whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review<sup>335</sup>. More specifically on the topic of this case study, four out of six selected NQFs are comprehensive by design (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, and Serbia), covering all education sectors, all levels, and qualifications awarded outside the formal system. Two countries (Czechia and France), exclude specific education sectors:

- In France for instance, the decision not to include general education and adult education qualifications, which are not directed towards the labour market, is not questioned by French stakeholders. It is a logical consequence of the development of the qualifications framework since 1969, which has always been conceived primarily as an instrument to regulate the labour market. Also, the fact that no major developments have taken place in the structure of general education qualifications for decades is another argument for stakeholders to treat these as separate. According to government stakeholders and experts interviewed in the in-depth country review, adult learning, as far as it is not immediately relevant to the labour market, should not be included in the RNCP (French NQF), or levelled in the qualifications framework, so as not to burden it with too many qualifications, which would be detrimental to transparency.
- In Czechia, the NQF contains all qualifications awarded in secondary education and higher education, and the qualifications included in the National Register of Qualifications (NRQ). The NRQ, however, does not systematically cover labour market qualifications.

Furthermore, all six countries to some extent opened-up their NQF to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training and all countries allow validation for qualifications included in the NQFs.

### Comprehensiveness of qualifications frameworks

This section aims to answer the question ‘how has the status of the EQF as a comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications in Europe evolved since 2017’. The EQF is, by definition, a comprehensive framework as it does not exclude any level, education and training sector, or qualification, if these qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes. Whether the EQF is, de facto, a comprehensive framework depends on the comprehensiveness of the NQFs referenced to the EQF. This section therefore discusses to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation helps the development of NQFs as comprehensive frameworks, and what are national contexts that stimulate or hinder the developments of comprehensive NQFs. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017, and developments since then, are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests that over time more countries have put in place more comprehensive NQFs, covering more education sectors, levels, qualifications outside the formal system, and, in general, including more qualifications. These developments contributed to an overall improvement of the status of the EQF to serve as comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications across all EQF countries. This is also dependent on the contextual developments in the country whereby increased emphasis on lifelong learning strengthen the role, relevance, and status of the NQF. Countries differ in attributing impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to the comprehensiveness of the NQFs. Countries with more mature frameworks see improvements linked stronger to internal national developments, while countries with

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<sup>335</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.

frameworks in development point to the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in inspiring those developments.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

The comprehensiveness of qualifications frameworks can be interpreted in different ways. It, firstly, can relate to whether the qualifications frameworks cover all (formal) education and training sectors. Secondly, it can relate to whether the frameworks cover all qualifications levels. Thirdly, it can refer to whether qualifications offered outside the formal education and training sectors are included. Lastly, it can refer to whether all qualifications are included in the sectors covered by qualifications frameworks. Table 22 below provides an overview of the situation in 2017 and the developments since then.

**Table 22. Overview of the situation in 2017 and the developments since then**

	Situation in 2017	Developments after 2017
Coverage of all E&T sectors	A large majority of countries covered all formal education and training sectors (35 of the 39 participating countries are working towards comprehensive frameworks).	The frameworks reached nearly full comprehensiveness when it comes to coverage of all formal sectors and all levels. In six countries <sup>336</sup> the frameworks still exclude specific education sectors (i.e. general education).
Coverage of all qualification levels	The frameworks covered mostly all (eight) levels, whereby six countries used a number of levels other than eight <sup>337</sup> , and eight countries used sublevels <sup>338</sup> .	In four countries <sup>339</sup> , qualifications are not linked to EQF level 1. The comprehensiveness in terms of levels of qualifications included in the EQF and related NQF is generally accepted in all European NQFs, as can be seen in the referencing reports. <sup>340</sup> France moved to an eight-level qualification framework.
Are qualifications offered outside formal E&T	Eight countries provided this opportunity <sup>341</sup> (and one non-EU country already opened-up prior to 2017 (Kosovo)).	The comprehensiveness increased as well when it comes to inclusion of qualifications awarded outside the formal systems. This increased from 8 to 13 <sup>342</sup> EU MS after 2017. Besides those countries, a large majority of the remaining countries (26) are working towards including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training; private providers, sectors, companies, and international bodies are also included in the NQFs. This includes conducting pilots on including those qualifications, developing procedures, and preparing legislation <sup>343</sup> .

<sup>336</sup> AT, CH, CZ, FR, LI, LT

<sup>337</sup> FR, IE, IS, NO, SI, UK-SC

<sup>338</sup> CY, HR, IS, MK, MN, NL, NO, RS

<sup>339</sup> DK, FI, IS, NO

<sup>340</sup> See EQF Referencing Reports: <https://europa.eu/europass/en/eqf-referencing-reports> [accessed 10 November 2022]

<sup>341</sup> DK, FR, MT, NL, PL, SE, SI, SK: Cedefop (2018). National qualifications framework developments in Europe 2017. Luxembourg: Publications Office. .

<sup>342</sup> Five countries opened-up since 2017: AT, BE (nl), CZ, EE, IE

<sup>343</sup> Cedefop. National Qualifications frameworks (NQFs) online tool. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool>. An example of how countries are working on including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training is Germany, where a pilot procedure has been carried out and evaluated. A working group has designed procedures of levelling such qualifications, defined quality assurance criteria and described the role of evaluators. In 2023, an introductory phase of the process is expected to start; selected qualifications awarded outside formal education and training will be levelled to the DQR.

	Situation in 2017	Developments after 2017
Coverage of qualifications in qualifications framework	Two countries took a step-by-step approach, only referencing exemplary qualifications (Austria and Italy), and hence not all potential qualifications were referenced. In countries that allowed qualifications outside the formal system to be included, a limited number of qualifications at that time was included in the NQF, as can be illustrated by the Netherlands (in 2017 the NLQF included 36 qualifications outside the formal system <sup>344</sup> ). Other countries (Ireland, UK-Scotland), illustrate that a large number of those qualifications are included in the frameworks.	Progress was made, as can be illustrated in Austria and Italy, where, since 2017, more qualifications besides exemplary qualifications are referenced <sup>345</sup> . In addition, more qualifications outside the formal systems are included in frameworks in the countries, such as the Netherlands <sup>346</sup> and Poland.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The respondents to the survey<sup>347</sup> (mainly public authorities (67%)) confirm this progress as they noted that new qualifications (67 out of 104 respondents or 64%), and new types of qualifications (38 out of 104 respondents or 37%) have been added in their countries since 2017. In addition, since 2017, some respondents (20 out of 104 or 19%) indicated that their NQF covers additional educational (sub-) sectors.

## Assessment

From the early days of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the established NQFs were already relatively comprehensive in nature, which only increased further between 2017 and 2022. Since 2017, more education sectors were added (also outside formal system), as well as additional levels, and types of qualifications. As such, the status of the EQF as a comprehensive framework covering all levels and types of qualifications increased over time and now represents a growing proportion of the whole education and training qualifications landscape in Europe. The exclusion of general education qualifications and level 1 in some NQFs is mostly justified by the fact that the NQF is mainly targeted at the labour market and hence focuses on qualifications with labour market relevance.

The comprehensiveness of NQF is highly dependent on national context, both in a positive and a negative way. Positively, contextual developments in a country can increase the status of the framework as being comprehensive. This even, while the status of the NQF as a comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications since 2017, did not substantially change. In the **Netherlands** for instance, as lifelong development became more important, also mechanisms that provide transparency within the training market (such as the Dutch qualifications framework (NLQF)) gained importance. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that the NLQF is included in the Stimulans Arbeidsmarkt Positie (Incentive for improvement of labour market position) (STAP) budget regulation which stipulates that qualifications with an NLQF-level indication are eligible for STAP funding. Furthermore, reflections on the impact of having both formal qualifications and qualifications outside the formal domain included in one comprehensive framework opened discussions about indicating the level of qualifications outside the formal system. A wide range of level indications are used ('*post-hbo*' (i.e. post bachelor qualifications), '*mbo-niveau*' (i.e. VET

<sup>344</sup> See: Ockham IPS (2017), Onderzoek NLQF

<sup>345</sup> Cedefop (2021). National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019: qualifications frameworks: transparency and added value for end beneficiaries. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<sup>346</sup> 205 qualifications offered outside the formal sector (as of November 30, 2022): <https://nlqf.nl/register?view=fronttable&id=9> (accessed 14-02-2023).

<sup>347</sup> Online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 2022.



level)), which all are slightly vague, imprecise, and not-protected level indications. The increasing prominence of the NLQF in the private training market has also expanded the use of the NLQF as a language to talk about the level of qualifications, as indicated by interviewees (mainly the providers). This suggests that the NLQF is becoming a favourable language to describe the education and training system in a comprehensive manner.

In other countries, national context is the main factor that negatively affects the comprehensiveness and application of the NQF. In **Czechia** for instance, national stakeholders (i.e. public authorities) emphasise the importance of the creation of an NQF for the Czech Republic, but note that a significant obstacle to the greater usefulness of the EQF lies in the absence of a lifelong learning strategy and a coherent legal framework covering all education and training provision. Other respondents mentioned the absence of continuity, as the NRQ is created and updated mainly within European Social Fund (ESF) funded projects that have a limited duration. Other obstacles to the use of the NRQ, highlighted by respondents, concerned low awareness among the general public and burdensome bureaucratic approval processes related to qualifications that hinder their timely updating. Some respondents mentioned that, in order to make the process of updating the NRQ more efficient, it is necessary to clarify the responsibilities of individual actors and balance the responsibilities of employers and educators. All in all, in Czechia, the NRQ cannot be perceived as a comprehensive framework. Moreover, a substantial link to supporting lifelong learning in a consistent manner is not yet established (as no lifelong learning strategy is developed). Hence, the NRQ does not provide a conducive environment to further include other qualifications outside those already included, increasing its comprehensiveness.

The country consultations brought together the perspectives from different stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), on whether the 2017 EQF Recommendation is perceived as having an impact on the comprehensiveness. Country representatives differ in attributing impact on the comprehensiveness of NQFs to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

In a first group of countries (Poland, Serbia), the respondents are confident in attributing an effect to the 2017 EQF Recommendation:

- In Poland, national development can to some extent be linked to the the 2017 EQF Recommendation. While the link is not explicit, growing numbers of market qualifications have been included, mostly after 2017. This development can be linked to the public support to include qualifications provided by Educational Research Institute, which is funded through ESF, and which might have not been possible if not for the revised 2017 EQF Recommendation's 'policy reminder' effect. Another important improvement was the introduction of a new Law on Higher Education and Science in 2018, which introduces level 5 full qualifications in higher education (short cycle)<sup>348</sup>. In Poland, the 2017 EQF Recommendation helped to uphold the policy of a comprehensive framework.
- In Serbia, many activities were directed at further developing the NQFS and the policies concerning lifelong learning. These activities led to the adoption of the NQFS Law in 2018, creating a legal basis for the establishment of organisations and bodies responsible for its implementation. In 2018, members of the NQFS Council were appointed, a Qualifications Agency was established, as were 12 Sector Skills Councils. These activities and developments are closely related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, according to respondents.

In another group of countries (France, Ireland, Netherlands), while respondents acknowledge the comprehensiveness of both national frameworks and the EQF (despite

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<sup>348</sup> Act of 20 July 2018, [Law on Higher Education and Science](#).

some parts of the education system not being (fully) covered), they do not signal developments in improving the comprehensiveness as being due to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In countries having more mature frameworks, the improvements related to NQFs are prompted by national developments instead of the EQF recommendations:

- In the Netherlands, for instance, interviewees do not notice an impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on the functioning of the NLQF or its impact on the Dutch education and training landscape. It is telling that the Nationaal Coördinatiepunt NLQF (NCP NLQF) website, among many articles, studies, evaluation reports on EQF/NLQF, provides a link to the 2008 EQF Recommendation, but not to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.<sup>349</sup>
- In Ireland, the developments in relation to the foreseen expansion in 2023 (i.e. allowing a wider range of quality assured qualifications and awarding bodies in the NFQ), are instigated by the logical development of the NFQ, instead of the EQF per se.

### Facilitating lifelong learning – non-formal and informal learning and its validation

This section aims to answer the question ‘to what extent and in what manner has the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving its objective of facilitating lifelong learning, also by linking non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes in different settings?’. In this section, the case study zooms in on how the EQF improved the conditions for lifelong learning. It particularly looks at whether NQFs have changed in the way that they deal with qualifications outside the formal domain, such as whether validation procedures are linked to NQFs, and whether NQFs support progress across different types of education sectors in lifelong learning. Before providing the assessment, discussing if and where the 2017 EQF Recommendation is influencing lifelong learning policies, that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017, and developments since then, are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, this section shows that the 2017 EQF Recommendation facilitated lifelong learning, but that there is potential to do even more. The impact could be observed not in terms of significantly improving participation rates in lifelong learning (i.e. this did not significantly increase between 2017 and 2021), but in terms of stimulating and supporting national reforms related to lifelong learning that might lead to better conditions for adults to learn. An increasing number of countries have opened-up their NQFs to qualifications offered outside formal education and training systems, however this is not yet practice for all NQFs. The countries with more mature and operational frameworks, that also cover qualifications offered outside formal education and training systems (e.g. Ireland, France, Poland, and the Netherlands) show that, while indicating that the 2017 EQF Recommendation had no major impact on lifelong learning, NQFs are becoming important tools in implementing lifelong learning policies and support improving the conditions for lifelong learning. The country case studies clearly show that NQFs can only support lifelong learning if they are embedded or linked to wider lifelong learning policies.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

In the previous section, the situation in 2017, and the developments related to opening up NQFs for qualifications offered outside of the formal system, is already presented. A CEDEFOP review of validation arrangements for non-formal and informal learning in the EU, EFTA countries and Türkiye found that such arrangement were available in all surveyed countries in at least one of three broad areas (education and training, labour market, and

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<sup>349</sup> NCP NLQF downloads and documents: <https://nlqf.nl/downloads> [accessed 30-09-2022]

third sector)<sup>350</sup>. Furthermore, most of these surveyed countries have links between validation processes and the NQF/EQF (32 out of the 36 covered)<sup>351</sup>. However, an evaluation in 2020 found that defining such links alone was not sufficient to fully implement validation procedures<sup>352</sup>, causing a weak link between validation processes and NQFs/EQF in a majority of countries.

## Assessment

There has been progress in opening-up of the EQF/NQF since 2017 (5 more countries opened-up), while validation arrangements were mostly in place in a majority of countries before 2017. Opening-up NQFs and having validation procedures in place do not result in higher participation rates in adult learning, as measured by the labour force survey<sup>353</sup>. The participation rate in 2017 was 10.4% and in 2021 10.8%<sup>354</sup>. For those countries having opened-up since 2017, three show an increase in the participation rate (Poland: +1.4%; Slovenia: +6.9%; Serbia: + 0.4%), and two a decrease (Austria: -1.2%; Denmark: -4.6%). Those countries that opened-up before 2017 show an increase in participation rate (Ireland: +4.6%; Netherlands; +7.5%; Sweden: +4.3%), and only France reports a decrease (-7.7%)<sup>355</sup>.

Respondents to the survey identify a link between developing NQFs and supporting lifelong learning. Eighty-one out of 116 (70%) respondents of the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities (77 out of 116 or 66%)), agreed or strongly agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation supported flexible learning and contributed to improving conditions for lifelong learning. Furthermore, the survey noted positive effects in terms of growth in the use of lifelong learning activities; more transparency in the market of lifelong learning; special accreditation of skills, and recognition of non-formal training and work experience. PC respondents (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), were less positive about this statement (123 out of 229 or 54% agreed or strongly agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation supported flexible learning).

The consultations with national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), during the case studies, show that, in some countries, developments in lifelong learning are associated with the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation, while in other countries this is not the case.

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<sup>350</sup> Cedefop, European Commission, ICF. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Synthesis report.

[http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european\\_inventory\\_validation\\_2018\\_synthesis.pdf](http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf). Instead of 2017, 2018 is taken as baseline as this synthesis report provides the most detailed information.

<sup>351</sup> Cedefop, European Commission, ICF. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Synthesis report.

[http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european\\_inventory\\_validation\\_2018\\_synthesis.pdf](http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf). Instead of 2017, 2018 is taken as baseline as this synthesis report provides the most detailed information.

<sup>352</sup> Evaluation SWD/2020/121 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0121>

<sup>353</sup> Eurostat (2022), Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and age (TRNG\_LFS\_01); [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG\\_LFS\\_01\\_custom\\_4586100/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFS_01_custom_4586100/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>354</sup> Not reaching the EU objectives for the lifelong learning to have 12.5% participation rate of 25-64 year old adults in lifelong learning in 2010 and 15% in 2020 (Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020 ). The Porto Summit in 2021 agreed on a new target of at least 60% of adults attending training courses every year in 2030 as measured by the Adult Education Survey. See: European Commission. (2021). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan | Porto Social Summit. EU 2021. <https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/porto-social-summit/action-plan/>

<sup>355</sup> There is no data for the UK. See: Eurostat (2022), Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and age (TRNG\_LFS\_01); [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG\\_LFS\\_01\\_custom\\_4586100/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFS_01_custom_4586100/default/table?lang=en)

## Countries where the 2017 EQF Recommendation is influencing lifelong learning policy developments

Of the countries selected for this case study, where NQFs have been more recently developed, and where they have been used to support larger reform agendas (e.g. Poland and Serbia), respondents (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), attribute the impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendations to facilitating lifelong learning. This is mainly seen in policy development and agenda-setting, but not so much in supporting learners in lifelong learning.

According to interviewed national stakeholders in **Poland** (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations had significant impact on Polish developments in lifelong learning policy and the qualifications system. The 2016 implementation of the NQF and the Integrated Qualifications System (IQS) provided a possibility for including market qualifications (which could be referred to as non-formal), into the IQS and levelling them. This means that they are integrated into one system, next to qualifications that already have a place in the national qualification framework. The 2017 EQF Recommendation largely maintained the policy direction and most relevant actions have been undertaken through the 2008 EQF Recommendation. The impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation should be seen as “sustaining” and/or “fine-tuning” for lifelong learning and Qualifications System development in Poland. It was called a “refreshing influence” for policy makers – it had a beneficial impact on the visibility of the topic in the political and policy agenda. On the other hand, the revised content did not have a significant influence in practice since no substantial changes were perceived in the 2017 EQF Recommendation content, and most of the recommended actions and solutions had already been undertaken. In **Serbia**, the 2018 NQFS Law allowed for the inclusion of qualifications outside the formal system in the qualifications framework. As confirmed by the national stakeholders interviewed (education and training providers, end beneficiaries), the NQFS allows facilitating lifelong learning by linking non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes in different settings. The NQFS is in the early stage of implementation, the activities are ongoing, and are implemented in significant number of different areas. Impact is therefore mainly seen in policy development and not (yet) in increased participation in lifelong learning.

## Countries where the 2017 EQF Recommendation is not perceived to impact lifelong learning policy development

In some other countries selected for this case study, often with more mature NQFs, the systems were already largely in place for the 2017 EQF Recommendation to impact opening-up, validation, and lifelong learning. This is for instance the case in France, the Netherlands, Ireland and, to some extent, Czechia. In those countries, the 2017 EQF Recommendation is not specifically perceived by stakeholders to have impacted lifelong learning policies. The Recommendation, however, is moving in the same direction as national reforms, trying to stimulate lifelong learning:

- In France, for instance, the 2017 EQF Recommendation is not seen by interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), as having had an influence on facilitating lifelong learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes in different settings. In France, there is no difference between formal and non-formal education and training. Private training providers have always played an important role in granting qualifications that were recognised in similar ways as those from public providers. Using the European terminology, the French NQF, developed before the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations, can be considered to include non-formal qualifications, with blank spots excluding those qualifications that are not geared towards the labour market.
- In the Netherlands, no clear contribution was identified by interviewed stakeholders for the 2017 EQF Recommendation to facilitating lifelong learning, such as on linking

non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes in different settings. The 2008 EQF Recommendation and the 2011 Dutch referencing report formed the basis for the Dutch approach to focus on the inclusion of non-formal qualifications.

- In Ireland, in 2017, a very high share of stakeholders – 81% - believed the NQF had by that time already ‘improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and in higher education and training’; and a lower percentage – but still a sizeable majority, 68% - believed it had facilitated and improved access to education and training courses<sup>356</sup>. Thus, with regard to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as indicated by interviewed national stakeholders, it is unlikely to have additionally impacted much on progression by virtue of the effects already being in the system.
- In Czechia, part of the functions of an NQF is performed by the National Register of Qualifications (NRQ). It was designed for the validation of non-formal and informal education and was established in 2006. As such, the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not impact the development of the register or lifelong learning policies. Interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers), also agree that the 2017 EQF Recommendations did not significantly improve the situation of lifelong learning in the country.

In the four countries mentioned above, developments related to NQFs must be positioned in a wider context of reforms related to facilitating lifelong learning. These reforms are generally not directly driven by NQF developments (or by the 2017 EQF Recommendation). However, once such a reform is initiated, there is an opportunity to reflect on the provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and include elements that help NQFs further function as facilitating tools for lifelong learning. In general, with an increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, the relevance of the NQFs also increases. This can be illustrated by several country cases. For example, the reform of the personal training account scheme in **France** (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) was first introduced in 2015 and revised in 2019<sup>357</sup>. This reform created a strong incentive for training providers to develop new qualifications and register them, as this made them eligible for funding. As such, the CPF strengthened the use, application, and prominence of the French NQF as an instrument related to lifelong learning without this being driven by the NQF or the EQF. Another example can be found in the **Netherlands**, where the NLQF is included in the regulation on an individual learning budget (launched in 2022)<sup>358</sup>. In terms of developments, since 2017, it is not so much that the NLQF changed (besides improvements in its organisation, procedures and more qualifications being included, as a follow up of the evaluation in 2017<sup>359</sup>), but that lifelong development has become more of a priority in the Netherlands. This is clearly expressed in the regular Parliamentary Letters on Lifelong Development (first appearing in 2018), the experimental pilots related to flexibilisation of (formal) qualifications, part-time studies, and subsidy programmes to stimulate lifelong development of individuals (STAP-budget), and

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<sup>356</sup> Indecon (2017) Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. [https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file/uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ%20Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file/uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ%20Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>357</sup> The 2019 revision to the CPF was mandated by the 2018 law for the freedom to choose one's own professional future: LOI n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel

<sup>358</sup> STAP-budget (Dutch acronym for Stimuleren Arbeidsmarktpositie, or Incentive Labour market Position): <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiele-regelingen/stap-budget> [accessed 30-09-2022] Qualifications included in the NLQF are eligible for learners that make use of the individual learning budget offered through this regulation.

<sup>359</sup> Ockham-IPS (2017), Onderzoek NLQF: [https://ockham-ips.nl/Portals/57/OpenContent/Files/4902/Onderzoek\\_NLQF\\_2017\\_B085.pdf](https://ockham-ips.nl/Portals/57/OpenContent/Files/4902/Onderzoek_NLQF_2017_B085.pdf) [accessed 30-09-2022]

companies (e.g. for SMEs, the SLIM-arrangement<sup>360</sup>). The increased relevance and interest in NLQF as a framework for transparency can be linked to broader developments in the country, but at the same time offered an opportunity to gain an indication of what level learning outcomes people have obtained.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study dealt with the question to what extent have conditions for lifelong learning improved through EQF/NQF developments (inclusion of non-formal qualifications and validation of learning approaches), and how much more comprehensive the EQF has become since 2017. First of all, the EQF by design is open to all qualifications at all levels, as long as these meet the conditions set by EQF countries in their own NQF. This review has shown that the NQFs linked to the EQF became more comprehensive between 2017 and 2021, as NQFs expanded to cover more levels and qualifications of the education and training sectors, and opened-up to qualifications offered outside the formal system (expanded from 8 to 13 EU countries)<sup>361</sup>. By becoming more comprehensive, the EQF has also strengthened in its potential to support lifelong learning, by offering more transparency of qualifications, permeability between systems, and facilitate transition between non-formal and formal systems. There is progress towards NQFs being seen as comprehensive frameworks in the countries selected for this case study. However, a majority of countries do not (yet) include qualifications offered outside the formal education system pointing to the further potential of the EQF and NQFs. Furthermore, the gathered evidence shows that there are clear examples of where the EQF and NQF development in countries triggered policy reforms related to lifelong learning. Yet, some examples (mostly countries with mature NQFs), suggest that the NQF is not considered to be driving lifelong learning policies. In those, the NQFs are seen as additional support tools that are integrated into wider lifelong learning reforms. Finally, while the study does see links between facilitating lifelong learning and the EQF, the evidence that the 2017 EQF Recommendation triggered additional developments is weak and confined to only a few countries.

In terms of future oriented perspectives, the EQF, and with it NQFs, could reflect on how smaller units of learning outcomes (i.e. micro-credentials) can be included in the frameworks, as these might play a more prominent role in lifelong learning in the future compared to formal (initial) qualifications. The increased importance of these smaller units may challenge the comprehensiveness of the EQF if they cannot be included.

## Case study topic 3: The EQF's role in stimulating reforms and fostering employability, mobility and social integration of learners and workers

The purpose of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is to improve the transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications. By doing so, the Recommendation aims at contributing to a wider set of objectives<sup>362</sup>, namely, to support modernisation of education and training systems (e.g. by placing a focus on learning outcomes, flexibility of learning pathways); and to increase employability (e.g. by giving access to jobs), mobility across sectoral and geographical borders (e.g. by enabling better assessment of qualifications), and social integration of workers and learners. This case study analyses to what extent and in what manner the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving these wider objectives.

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<sup>360</sup> SLIM-regeling (Subsidy for learning and development in SMEs): <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiele-regelingen/slim-regeling> [accessed 30-09-2022]

<sup>361</sup> See Cedefop (2020). The countries mentioned in the text were informally validated by Cedefop against the preliminary draft outcomes of the 2022 inventory round.

<sup>362</sup> Laid out in recital 4 of the Recommendation.

The current state of play, as seen in Cedefop 2020 NQF reports and the EQF AG notes, is that NQFs are linked to national reforms of education and training systems in all EQF countries. The reforms mentioned are often directly linked to the dynamics of setting up an NQF, such as the introduction of the eight-level system, introduction of learning outcomes-based approaches to describing qualifications, strengthening quality assurance systems, and developing databases. This case study will examine to what extent and how the 2017 EQF Recommendation informed the reforms at national level, and to what extent these reforms improved conditions in employment systems and systems for mobility and social integration of learners and workers.

The case study approach brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. Five supporting country case studies have been conducted in Germany, Finland, France, Serbia, and Slovenia. In total, 36 stakeholders were consulted as part of (group) interviewees in the country-level consultations on this topic<sup>363</sup>. Among the 36 stakeholders consulted, seven represent public authorities, eight – authorities working with qualifications, 15 – education and training providers, and six – end beneficiaries.

The five countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the type of skills-formation system, the development stage of the NQF, and whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review.<sup>364</sup> More specifically on the topic of this case study, one out of five countries already started developing an NQF long before the adoption of the EQF (France). The development of NQFs in four countries were directly triggered by the 2008 EQF Recommendation (Germany, Finland, Serbia, and Slovenia). Two countries referenced their NQF after 2017 (Slovenia, Serbia), and one country updated its referencing after a major reform of its NQF (France). Furthermore, two out of the five countries have a dual system of VET (Germany, Slovenia), which is traditionally built on a strict separation between VET and HE, which is at odds with the intrinsic logic of permeability and outcome-orientation of the EQF.

### The role of the EQF in informing national reforms of the education and training systems

This section aims to answer the question ‘To what extent and in what manner has the EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving the wider objective of modernising education and training systems?’. The EQF does not impose a particular model of education and training system on countries. The case study will, therefore, focus on reforms immediately linked to the introduction and operation of NQFs, while also broadening the scope to examine reforms of the education and training system, which directly imply the existence and the use of EQF/NQFs.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests that the 2017 EQF Recommendation, to a limited extent, helped inform reforms concerning the qualification systems at national level. These reforms included the development or renewal of NQFs and related measures, such as the generalisation of the use of learning outcomes, the introduction of modularisation and validation mechanisms, or the introduction of new qualification types. In some countries where controversial debates were conducted about levelling specific qualifications (e.g. Germany, France), the 2017 EQF Recommendation was referred to by stakeholders to reach an agreement. Beyond this, reform activities since 2017 to promote employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers, for

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<sup>363</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview the type of organisations consulted.

<sup>364</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.

instance through the development of new funding mechanisms for lifelong learning or a closer coordination between education providers and the labour market, are well aligned with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The drivers of these reforms, however, are deeply rooted in national contexts and not related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation (e.g. demographic change, youth unemployment, skills gaps, increasing social inequalities).

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

A comparative analysis between 1995 and 2015 reveals broad trends affecting VET systems in Europe, and related changes in the institutions and practices at national level (such as a shift to learning outcomes, more coherent VET systems integrated within the overall education and training systems, or increased permeability, and fewer dead-ends in VET systems)<sup>365</sup>. These developments, which correspond largely to EQF principles and, more broadly, to the principles and ideas underlying associated EU instruments and policy initiatives (e.g. ECTS and ECVET), have also continued after 2017. An ongoing Cedefop project on the Future of VET<sup>366</sup>, focussing on opening-up IVET to adult learning between 1995 and 2020, noticed several trends. These included an increased emphasis on modularisation and learning outcome approaches, and more emphasis on validation processes to shorten and tailor the provision to individual needs. A closer look reveals, however, a persisting diversity of VET systems resulting in different ways of implementing seemingly identic concepts (e.g. modularisation, learning outcomes).<sup>367</sup> A similar conclusion can be drawn in the field of higher education. The Bologna Process Implementation Report<sup>368</sup> demonstrates how the Bologna Declaration in 1999 set the HE systems over Europe” on a path in the same direction” (op. cit. p.9), with the implementation of common principles progressing since then – notwithstanding some oppositions and resistances. Specifically, convergent degree structures were developed and related to the NQF/EQF, including reforms around learning outcomes, quality assurance, modularisation, and recognition processes. At the same time, some work still remains to be done to further implement the principles of the Paris Communiqué from 2018, such as ensuring better international recognition of degrees, increasing the comparability of short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials, or increasing further the permeability between VET and higher education.

## Assessment

The following country examples demonstrate how the 2017 EQF Recommendation was introduced into national discourses about reforms, which had already been triggered or at least strongly influenced by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. In addition, the large majority of PC respondents, regardless a country group, (189 out of 229 or 83%) agreed or strongly agreed that European cooperation in the framework of the EQF was one of the factors that has inspired education and training reforms in their countries.

One type of reform concerns qualification systems, aligning them better with the EQF approach. This type of reform is especially seen in countries having recently adopted or revised and referenced their NQF, such as **Finland** (2017), **France** (2021), and **Serbia**

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<sup>365</sup> Cedefop (2020). *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995-2035: scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series, No 114. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/794471>

<sup>366</sup> Cedefop (forthcoming), *The Future of Vocational Education and Training in Europe; Work Assignment 4: Delivering lifelong learning; the changing relationship between IVET and CVET*

<sup>367</sup> Piiz, M.; Li, J. Canning, R.; Minty, S. (2018): *Modularisation approaches in Initial Vocational Education: evidence for policy convergence in Europe?* In: *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 70:1, 1-26, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2017.1392994

<sup>368</sup> European Commission (ed.) (2020): *The European Higher Education Area. Bologna Process Implementation Report*. Luxembourg, Publications Office. [https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-06/ehea\\_bologna\\_2020\\_other\\_parts.pdf](https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-06/ehea_bologna_2020_other_parts.pdf)



(2018). Interestingly, however, **Germany** also carried out important reforms of the qualification system despite having adopted the DQR in 2012, showing a long-lasting impact of the NQF on reform activities:

- Where this was not already the case, learning outcomes approaches have been extended to all sub-sectors of the education and training landscape since 2017 (e.g. in Finland and Serbia). In Serbia for instance, national stakeholders interviewed indicated that the 2017 EQF Recommendation informed the drafting of the 2018 NQFS Law. The newly established NQFS now includes VET and HE qualifications and makes the use of learning outcomes for describing qualification standards mandatory.
- Modularisation is progressing, closely linked with introducing or reforming mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the introduction of more flexibility through partial validation (Germany, France, Serbia). In France, for instance, qualifications are now divided into “competence blocks” to facilitate validation and accumulation of learning outcomes achieved in different learning contexts. In Germany, several initiatives exist to facilitate the partial validation of qualifications and the accumulation of units of learning outcomes towards the award of a full qualification, such as the pilot project ETAPP<sup>369</sup> (2019-2022). ETAPP is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and aimed at the development of nationally agreed standards. The principles set out in the 2017 EQF Recommendation are referred to in debates at national level to highlight the necessity of conducting reforms which, according to the national stakeholders interviewed, are sometimes highly controversial, especially in Germany.
- Qualifications frameworks have been opened-up to integrate new types of qualifications (e.g. in Germany, the creation of Professional Bachelor’s and Masters Degrees at level 6 and 7 in 2020), or qualifications, which were not levelled before (e.g. Baccalauréat Général and the vocational qualification certificates (CQPs), issued by organisations jointly run by the social partners in France). Such reforms participate in a broader trend to bring different sub-sectors of the education and training system closer together, with the aim of facilitating mobility and progression (see also case study 2 on Lifelong Learning). According to the national stakeholders interviewed, in both cases, references to the EQF were made during the debates around these reforms to justify the choice to implement decisions counteracting the traditional view on these qualifications.

Beyond these reforms immediately related to the EQF/NQFs, a second type of reform of the education and training system can be characterised as supporting social integration, mobility, and employability. While they are not directly touching upon qualification systems, these reforms at national level potentially support the implementation and impact of EQF/NQFs by providing, for instance, financial means, guidance and institutional settings for individuals and organisations to take advantage of the establishment of NQFs:

- New financing mechanisms and/or increased budgets for lifelong learning have been decided in **Germany, Finland, France, and Slovenia**. In France, for instance, the personal training account scheme established in 2014 was reformed in 2018, in order to facilitate the financing of short trainings registered in the national register of certificates and the validation of prior learning. In Germany, the financial support for continuing vocational training was increased twice (2016, 2019), and another increase is foreseen for the current legislative period (expected 2023/2024).

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<sup>369</sup> ETAPP stands for *Etablierung eines Teilqualifizierungsstandards für An- und ungelernete Erwachsene über 25 unter Praxisrelevanten und Pädagogischen Anforderungen* (Establishment of a partial qualification standard for semi-skilled and unskilled adults over 25 under practical and pedagogical requirements).

- Education and the world of work are brought closer together in some countries. For instance, through the establishment of Sector Skills Councils in **Serbia**, or the 2018 VET reform in **Finland**, it was aimed to increase flexibility of the educational institutions in meeting the local and regional competence needs, and reduce barriers between initial and further/adult education. The reform reduced the number of qualifications from 351 to 164 to increase transparency, while also allowing a greater choice of specialisations within the given qualification. In higher education, common competence areas, such as learning to learn, performing in the world of work, ethical behaviours, sustainable development, internationality and diversity, and proactive development, were introduced in both Bachelor- and Master-level degrees in universities of applied sciences.

Reforms of the education and training systems, conducted since 2017, are generally well aligned with the EQF/NQFs. Reforms closely linked to NQFs, including the adoption or revision of NQF and the implementation of related mechanisms (e.g. validation, quality assurance, learning outcomes), have been triggered mainly by the 2008 EQF Recommendation in all five countries. According to national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), in four out of five countries (Germany, Finland, France, Serbia), the 2017 EQF Recommendation is said to have informed related debates. In **France** for instance, “even if the European policy agenda (based on promoting mobility and guaranteeing comparability of qualifications), was not at the heart of the French reform process, it gradually entered into the debate, with references being made to it in official and working documents issued by national agencies. The final result was gradual alignment with the Lisbon principles, even though they were never the main drivers of reform”<sup>370</sup>. This alignment with EU policies, and more specifically with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, materialised, for instance in the definition of level descriptors – the choice of having eight levels instead of five – and the levelling of the *Baccalauréat Général* (qualification awarded at the end of upper secondary general education). As a result, the new law of 5 September 2018 on the “freedom to choose one’s professional future”, which includes a re-organisation of the French qualification framework, even makes an explicit reference to the Recommendation from 2017 in the third paragraph of article L.6113-1 of the labour code. In **Serbia**, the effects of the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations are difficult to disentangle, as the NQFS was developed mainly based on the 2008 EQF Recommendation. According to national stakeholders, however, the implementation, since the adoption of the NQFS Law in 2018, is informed by the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Looking more generally at education and training reforms since 2017 implying and/or supporting the use of the NQF for employability, mobility, and social integration, they are also well aligned with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. National stakeholders interviewed in the country studies (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), however, pointed to national issues as the main drivers of these reforms – such as demographic change, skills gaps and skills mismatch, or youth unemployment. Accordingly, the reform agendas differ from country to country, as do the issues which, according to national stakeholders interviewed, are still unresolved:

- The validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the partial validation of modules to reach a full qualification, are still to be improved, according to national stakeholders interviewed in **Germany** (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), and **Slovenia** (public authorities, education and training providers).
- Micro-credentials are increasingly perceived as instruments to target specific skills gaps, as demonstrated in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in

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<sup>370</sup> Sgarzi, M. (2020). French exceptionalism tested against the Lisbon strategy principles. The case of the Qualifications Framework implementation process. In: *bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschafts-pädagogik – online*, issue 39, 1-16. P.1. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/sgarzi_bwpat39.pdf)

**Slovenia.** Whether and how to link them to NQFs remains an open question. In **Germany**, the discussion is controversial, as some fear a fragmentation of the highly valued dual VET qualifications. National stakeholders interviewed in **Germany** (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), stated the wish to discuss these issues at EU-level in order to find common solutions not yet provided by the 2017 EQF Recommendation.<sup>371</sup>

## Supporting employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers

This section aims to answer the question to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving the wider objectives of increasing employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers.

**Overall**, the gathered evidence does not allow concluding on the direct impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers. As pointed to in the previous section, the impact was rather in terms of informing the reforms that might ultimately lead to this type of measurable changes in individual behaviours.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

The question, whether reforms aligned with the EQF/NQFs reached the individual level, translating into increased mobility, social integration, and employability, cannot be answered on the basis of statistical evidence, as it is not possible to establish causal links. Some key indicators at EU-level point to advantageous developments in all three dimensions between 2017 and 2022, but with big differences between countries and some drawbacks in specific areas (e.g. labour market performance of mobile EU citizens).

According to Eurostat data,<sup>372</sup> the situation regarding youth employability and integration of migrants in the labour market shows some signs of improvement since 2017. The data, however, indicates that, despite increased efforts to increase the employability and integration of foreign and migrant workers, a gap remains between the Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) rates of national citizens and foreign citizens:

- The NEET rate of young people in the EU-27 has decreased since 2017 for both citizens of Member States and foreign citizens in Member States. For national citizens (aged 15 – 29 years), this has gone from 12.8% in 2017 to 12.3% in 2021. Notably, this figure was lowest in 2019, before the Coronavirus pandemic, at 11.8%. While rates have dropped following 2017, data shows that this rate has been steadily falling since 2013 (where it stood at 15.2%).<sup>373</sup>
- Comparatively, when citizenship is that of a foreign country, this rate is much higher. The percentage population of NEET young persons with citizenship from a foreign country in the EU-27 was 21.9% in 2021 (down from 23.6% in 2017).<sup>374</sup> Italy had the highest NEET rate in people with foreign citizenship in 2021 at 33.3%, and Denmark the lowest at 9.7%.

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<sup>371</sup> Hippach-Schneider, U.; Le Mouillour, I. (2022): Micro-credentials: eine europäische Initiative für das lebenslange Lernen – neu und doch bekannt. In: BWP, 2022:3, 35-39.

<sup>372</sup> Eurostat, 2022. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and citizenship (NEET rates). [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT\\_LFSE\\_23/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_23/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>373</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/SDG\\_08\\_20A\\_\\_custom\\_3781280/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/SDG_08_20A__custom_3781280/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>374</sup> Eurostat (n.d.). Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and citizenship (NEET rates). [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT\\_LFSE\\_23\\_\\_custom\\_3781365/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_23__custom_3781365/default/table?lang=en)

According to Eurostat statistics on migrant integration, foreign citizens in the EU were more likely than nationals to be over-qualified. Over-qualified workers are defined as “persons with a tertiary level of educational attainment (as defined by the international standard classification of education (ISCED) levels 5-8), working in low- or medium-skilled occupations (as defined by the international standard classification of occupations (ISCO) groups 4-9), for which a tertiary level of educational attainment is not required.”<sup>375</sup> Data on over-qualification of migrants can provide insight into how appropriately foreign citizens are integrated into the labour market given their level of qualification. Higher level of qualification tends to indicate better labour prospects.<sup>376</sup>

- In 2020 the over-qualification rate for non-EU citizens was 41.4% compared to 20.8% for nationals. Luxembourg had the lowest rate of over-qualification at 10.8% and Greece the highest, at 71.6%. Over-qualification was over 50% in Italy, Spain, and Cyprus. From 2010 to 2020, the over-qualification rate for EU nationals aged 20-64 years rose by 1.4 points, while for non-EU citizens it fell by 6.3 points. This was observed in 12 of the 17 EU Member States for which data was available, with the largest decreases seen in Spain, Sweden, Italy, Greece, and Portugal. While this indicates that the gap between over-qualification in national and foreign citizens is closing, there is no evidence to suggest that this is a result of improved validation and recognition mechanisms, and the rate of over-qualification in foreign citizens remains high. This is especially true for older populations where, in 2020, over-qualification rates were higher in non-EU citizens among older people (45.3%), than for younger people (35.9%), although in nine Member States, this was not the case.

As regards mobility, according to OECD data,<sup>377</sup> the share of international students in higher education just slightly rose from 7.5 to 8.2% in average for OECD countries in Europe. As regards to labour mobility within Member States, the share of EU movers in the working-age population has increased steadily since 2017. In January 2020, they made up 3.8% of the working-age population in the EU, increasing by a similar rate every year since 2017, when the proportion was 3.5%.<sup>378</sup> In the same period, the employment rate of EU mobile workers decreased, and the unemployment rate increased in 2020. Compared to 2019, the employment rate of movers fell by 2.6 percentage points to 72.7%; this was a slightly larger drop than the employment rate of non-mobile workers, which fell by 0.5 percentage points to 73.3%. The unemployment rate of movers increased by one percentage point to 9% in 2020. Unemployment among nationals remained the same as in 2019 (6%). These negative developments represent a break with previous trends and might be related, among others, to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>379</sup>

## Assessment

No impact studies exist, to date, to establish a causal link between the 2017 EQF Recommendation, NQFs developments, and indicators on employability, mobility, and social integration.<sup>380</sup> In order to answer the evaluation question, it is therefore only possible

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<sup>375</sup> Eurostat (2021). Migration integration statistics -over-qualification. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_over-qualification#cite\\_note-1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_over-qualification#cite_note-1)

<sup>376</sup> Eurostat (2021). Migration integration statistics -over-qualification. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_over-qualification#cite\\_note-1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_over-qualification#cite_note-1)

<sup>377</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/students/international-student-mobility.htm> (includes Greece, Italy, Spain, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, Slovenia, Finland, France, Ireland, Denmark, Slovak Republic, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Estonia, Latvia, Netherlands, Hungary, Czech Republic, Austria, Luxembourg)

<sup>378</sup> Eurostat (2022): Annual Report on intra-EU labour mobility 2022, p.12.

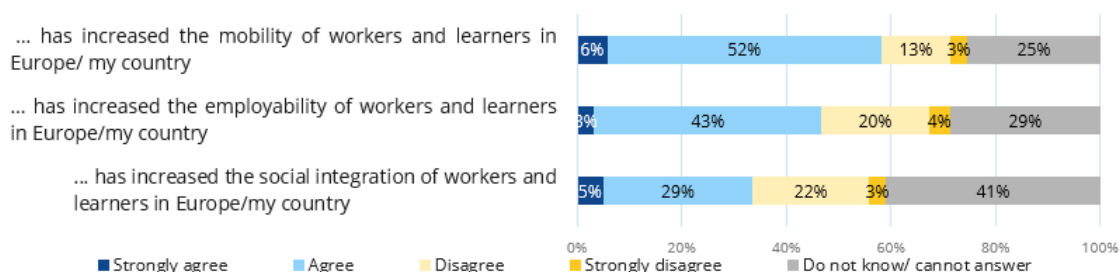
<sup>379</sup> Eurostat (2022): Annual Report on intra-EU labour mobility 2022, p.13.

<sup>380</sup> Bohlinger (2019), in her research on the impact of the EQF 10 years after its launch, finds little evidence that the EQF solved the challenges it was developed for. The author provides several examples of countries where NQFs exist primarily “on paper” but have no significant influence on labour market or education activities. In particular, she points to the fact that

to refer to stakeholder perceptions from the respondents to the survey and PC, and to anecdotal evidence.

In the survey (n=122), and PC (n=229), around half of respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, and holders of qualifications), from different countries and European/international organisations agreed or strongly agreed that European cooperation in the framework of the EQF has increased mobility (71 or 58% in survey and 133 or 58%<sup>381</sup> in PC), and employability (57 or 46% in survey and 141 or 61% in PC), of workers and learners. It is important to mention that substantial share of respondents could not answer this question<sup>382</sup>, which underlines the difficulty to establish a causal link. The statement about whether European cooperation in the framework of the EQF has increased the social integration of workers and learners received slightly less support in both the survey and PC (41 or 34% in survey and 103 or 45% in PC). In addition, a high share of respondents (50 or 41% in the survey and 77 or 34% in the PC), did not or could not assess these EQF impacts, showing the difficulty to link them to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

**Figure 30. To what extent do you agree or disagree that: “European cooperation in the framework of the EQF....”**



Note: N=122.

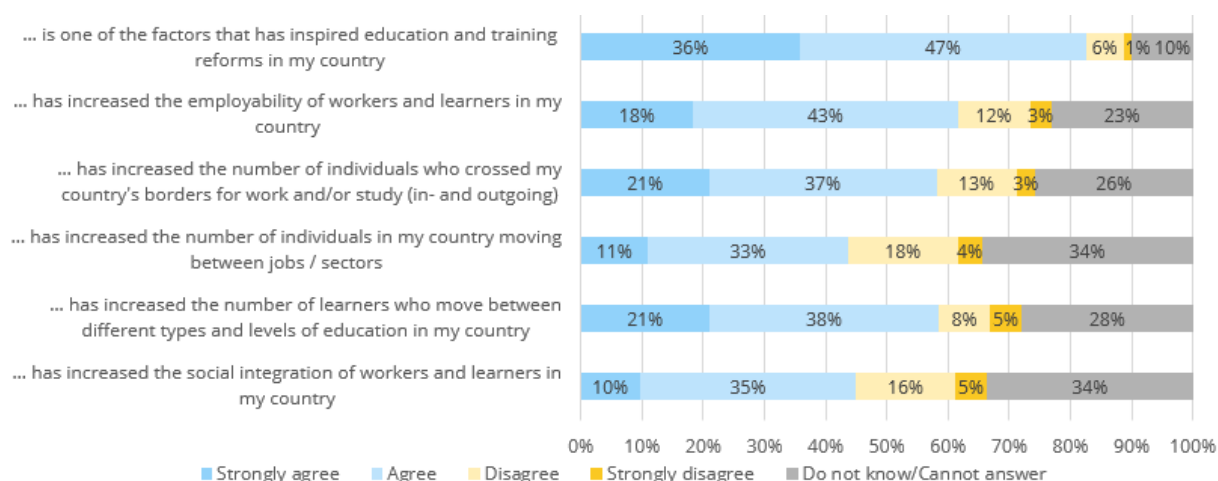
Source: Targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

“there is no evidence that NQFs and the EQF in particular have any effect on social transformation and the establishment of educational meritocracies where the only barriers learners encountered are the limits of their own potential to learn”. Her research is one of the very few academic papers published on the impact of the EQF since 2017. Bohlingen, S. (2019), Ten years after: the ‘success story’ of the European qualifications framework; in: Journal of Education and Work Volume 32, 2019 - Issue 4, p. 393-406.

<sup>381</sup> This was covered by three survey statements. European cooperation in the framework of the EQF....: 1) ... has increased the number of individuals who crossed my country's borders for work and/or study (in- and outgoing) (133 or 58% (strongly) agreed); 2) ... has increased the number of individuals in my country moving between jobs / sectors (100 or 44% (strongly) agreed); 3) ... has increased the number of learners who move between different types and levels of education in my country (134 or 59% (strongly) agreed).

<sup>382</sup> Survey: up to 35%; PC: up to 75%.

**Figure 31. To what extent do you agree or disagree that: “European cooperation in the framework of the EQF....”**



Note: Total (N)=229.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

Anecdotal evidence from the five country studies suggests following developments:

- Mobility of learners and workers, especially cross-border, is seen by national stakeholders interviewed in **Germany** (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), and **Finland** (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers), to work well and to have been even further facilitated since 2017. In Germany, the demand for information via the DQR portal is high, especially from foreign workers. Transparency of the German education system for foreign citizens is still deemed low, however, with a strong need for clearer and less complex information. In Finland, the implementation of ECTS and Diploma Supplements are considered to contribute to the general perception that international mobility and the recognition of learning outcomes achieved abroad is becoming easier. Between 2017 and 2019, i.e. before the Covid-19 pandemic, short-term mobility (incoming and outgoing), in higher education and incoming mobility in VET increased as well, while other types of mobility remained stable or decreased slightly.<sup>383</sup>
- Youth employability has improved since 2017 in **Serbia** and **France**. These developments, however, cannot be directly attributed to recent reforms. In Serbia for instance, new curricula have not been implemented long enough for a significant number of graduates to have already transitioned to the labour market. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic had a strong negative impact on a wide range of social and economic indicators.
- Social integration through more flexible and individualised learning paths is said to have improved in **Finland**, thanks to better guidance and financial support to adult education. In **France**, existing studies on personal training accounts and other schemes supporting re-skilling and up-skilling (e.g. the validation of prior learning), point to the crucial importance of personal guidance, and additional (also financial), support for the least qualified workers to take advantage of these reforms and implement ambitious re-/up-skilling projects.<sup>384</sup>

<sup>383</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (n.d.). Statistics <https://www.oph.fi/en/publications-and-statistics/statistics> (accessed 03.04.2023)

<sup>384</sup> Stephanus, C. & Vero, J. (2022). Se reconvertir, c'est du boulot! Enquête sur les travailleurs non qualifiés. In : Céreq Bref, 418. <https://www.cereq.fr/se-reconvertir-cest-du-boulot-enquete-sur-les-travailleurs-non-qualifies>

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study dealt with the question to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation had an impact on reforms to modernise education and training systems, thereby increasing the mobility, employability, and social integration of learners and workers. Altogether, the case study shows that, since 2017, the development or renewal of NQFs was triggered mainly by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. This led to reforms of qualification systems all over Europe, such as the generalisation of learning outcomes-oriented standards, the introduction of new qualification types, and more flexible learning pathways through modularisation and validation mechanisms, etc. These reforms were to some extent informed by the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as evidenced in the five countries examined in this case study (Germany, Finland, France, Slovenia, and Serbia). Broader reforms of the education and training system, not directly linked to the EQF/NQFs, were also conducted in these countries, in order to support lifelong learning. However, this type of reform was rather shaped by national priorities and particularities, even though they are aligned to EQF/NQF principles. At the level of individuals, there is no evidence to measure the impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and respondents to the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities), are careful in assessing any changes since 2017. Their assessment, as well as anecdotal evidence, suggest that mobility has been facilitated the most, while the impact on employability and social integration is more difficult to identify.

Reflecting on the results of this case study, lessons can be drawn both on the shape of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and future perspectives to be reflected at EU-level:

- With regard to the shape of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, this case study illustrates the difficulties associated with evaluating an impact for an overarching goal, which is not formulated as a SMART objective (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Reasonable, Time-bound). While experts surveyed for instance through a targeted online-questionnaire might assess whether it is plausible to assume that there is an impact, this assessment cannot be backed by statistical evidence.
- With regard to future oriented perspectives on the EQF, national debates in some countries (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands), are going on about whether and how to integrate smaller units of learning outcomes into the NQFs (i.e. micro-credentials). Such integration is not straightforward, as it leads to a fragmentation or proliferation of qualifications that make it more difficult for end-users to navigate, without further measures. While national stakeholders interviewed in France, for instance, said that the issue is not pressing yet because micro-credentials do not play an important role on the labour market, stakeholders in Germany are calling for a debate at EU-level.
- While it might be overly ambitious to expect EQF/NQFs to have a measurable impact at individual level, it is interesting to note that national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), referred to the 2017 EQF Recommendation in the debates surrounding the reforms of qualification systems. Accordingly, communicating about the Recommendation, and making it well-known and easily understandable, could further increase its role to inform decision-making at national level.

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Vero, J. & Dubois, J.-M. (2019). Le compte personnel de formation peut-il ouvrir les chemins de la liberté? In: Berthet, T. & Vanuls, C. (ed.). *Vers une flexicurité à la française ?* Toulouse: Octarès, pp. 233-253.

Werquin, P. (2021). Recognition of prior learning in France: Where have the RPL-ready applicants gone? In: *European Journal of Education, Research, Development and Policy*, 56/3, 391-406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12465>

## Case study topic 4: Quality Assurance

This case study focuses on the extent to which provision MS3 and the related Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which relates to ensuring “qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV, [...]”<sup>385</sup>, have been implemented, and what other quality assurance (QA) related developments the Recommendation triggered across Europe. QA is a key element of the EQF, as QA enhances trust in the quality and level of individual qualifications. However, if shared QA principles are applied, it also enhances trust in the comparability of various qualifications and, by extension, of qualification frameworks. As fostering comparability and trust across European education and training systems is at the heart of the EQF, this case study seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent has provision MS3 (on QA) been implemented?
- How are the quality assurance principles used in practice in countries, and what effects can be observed as a result of how they are used?

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. For this case study, three in-depth country reviews have been conducted, covering Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovenia. In total, 26 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic. Among 26 stakeholders consulted, eight represent public authorities, seven – authorities working with qualifications, eight – education and training providers, three – end beneficiaries.

The selected countries offer a sufficient mix of similarities (welfare state organisation, NQF development stage), and differences (size, geographical location, and skills formation system), and in general illustrate how provision MS3 and Annex IV has impacted different Member States. Data from countries includes the results of a total of 21 individual or group interviews across a range of stakeholders (i.e. representatives from relevant state institutions, schools, oversight bodies, national coordination institutions, etc.).

### State of Implementation of recommendation 3 Provision MS3 on Quality Assurance

This section aims to assess the extent to which provision MS3 on quality assurance has been implemented. That is, it traces policy developments and changes concerning QA in the context of the EQF up until, and since 2017, and seeks to provide reasons for those developments and possible links to the EQF.

The overall **conclusion** is that all activity, in terms of ensuring quality assurance of NQFs, as well as individual qualifications with the respective NQF, occurred before the publication of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. A change in scope in terms of QA did occur from the 2008 to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as the focus shifted from quality assurance at system-level to quality assurance of individual qualifications with an EQF level assigned to them. However, this change has not and was never meant to bare practical consequences, as the principles of QA in the 2017 EQF Recommendation remained compatible with established Europe-wide QA standards, such as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and European Quality Assurance

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<sup>385</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).



in Vocation Education and Training (EQAVET). Further, provision MS3 continued to echo referencing criteria five and six<sup>386</sup> from the 2013 EQF referencing guide.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Due to the fragmented nature of quality assurance, oftentimes with different sub-systems in place for different branches of education, mapping QA systems across EQF countries, is a difficult task. Further, studies that do exist tend to focus on specific education sectors and the respective sector's QA framework, such as EQAVET for VET and ESG for Higher Education. However, since both EQAVET and ESG are fully compatible with provision MS3 and Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, studies surveying the state of implementation of these frameworks can serve as a proxy for adherence to the Recommendation's QA principles in the respective sector.

In this spirit, results from the 2019 Study on EU VET Instruments shows that as early as 2013 24 Member States, as well as Flanders, already had EQAVET-conform quality assurance systems for VET in place. Only three, as well as Wallonia, were still developing EQAVET-conform systems. By 2018, only Wallonia's was still under development. Importantly, this does not include data on non-EU MS.<sup>387</sup> As for Higher Education, a 2011 mapping exercise on the implementation and application of the ESG has shown that already at the time ESG standards have widely been accepted and implemented across the sector, without providing disaggregated country data.<sup>388</sup> In secondary education, the picture is different. Here, a 2015 comparative study shows that QA provisions do exist, but were oftentimes not sufficiently consolidated and rather limited in scope, again without providing disaggregated country data.<sup>389</sup> Finally, concerning non-formal education, a 2013 review of quality assurance in such qualifications, which included all MS, EFTA countries, and accession candidates at the time, shows that few countries had QA systems in place for non-formal education. The only exceptions were Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, and Austria.<sup>390</sup> Interestingly, only Denmark's and Sweden's NQF had been open to qualifications outside formal education before 2017, whereas no developments towards non-formal qualifications were known in the other.

Importantly, all developments, in terms of harmonising with quality assurance provisions, occurred before the publication of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Developments from the countries studied in-depth for this case study serve to illustrate this point, as well as the above:

- In **Germany**, quality assurance is not primarily based on provision MS3 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, nor on the relevant provision of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. That is because QA mechanisms in German education predate the introduction of the EQF, as well as the German NQF, the DQR (Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen). However, German QA mechanisms of all branches of education covered by the DQR (all formal education, except non-formal and informal education), are fully compliant with provision MS3 by virtue of being aligned with

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<sup>386</sup> 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."

<sup>387</sup> European Commission (2019), Study on EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET).

<sup>388</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in HE (2011), [Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG](#) (MAP-ESG Project), Brussels.

<sup>389</sup> European Commission (2015), [Comparative study on quality assurance in EU school education systems: policies, procedures and practices](#), Publications Office, 2015.

<sup>390</sup> Panteia (2013), [Developing the adult learning sector Quality in the Adult Learning Sector](#) (Lot 1), p. 28.

pre-existing, sectoral QA frameworks that are also compliant with the principles set out by the Recommendation, such as ESG or EQAVET.

- In the **Netherlands**, no additional QA regulations were introduced as a result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, despite the 2019 re-referencing. The current QA regime dates to the 2011 referencing, and unlike in Germany, covers formal as well as qualifications outside the formal education and training system. However, QA in the NLQF is assumed to be fully compliant with provision MS3 and the criteria set out in Annex IV of the Recommendation by virtue of the Dutch referencing reports having been accepted and published. Interestingly, stakeholders consulted (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), did not mention the ESG or EQAVET in this context.
- **Slovenia's** national framework for quality assurance was adopted in February 2017, three months prior to the publication of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Despite predating the Recommendation, Slovenia's QA framework is fully compliant with provision MS3 and Annex IV, as it has been modelled after ESG and EQAVET standards. Unlike in the Netherlands, and more similarly to Germany, Slovenia's QA framework was introduced independently from its NQF.

## Assessment

In terms of quality assurance, the 2017 EQF Recommendation's purpose has been to finetune the previous Recommendation's provisions. The key change introduced in 2017 has been a change in scope. Instead of being directed at the system-level only, quality assurance is now to be ensured for each individual qualification with an associated EQF level. This change was neither intended to effect substantial changes or upgrades to existing QA systems, nor did it, in practice, lead to any major changes.

The situation, as it had been by 2017, and developments since then reflect this argument. Existing sectoral quality assurance frameworks, such as EQAVET and ESG, had already been compatible with the 2008 EQF Recommendation's provisions on quality assurance, and continued to be compatible with the 2017 ones. In addition, provision MS3 continued to echo referencing criteria five and six<sup>391</sup> from the 2013 EQF referencing guide.<sup>392</sup> As such, by virtue of acceptance of a country's referencing report, that country's education system can be considered sufficiently quality assured. Consequently, major policy developments in responses to provision MS3 were neither to be expected, nor did they occur. The only developments that are expected to occur are the result of emerging forms of learning that fall outside of formal education, which might necessitate changes to existing QA systems.

One finding that is worth highlighting is that it seems education sectors with their own, sectoral QA framework such as VET and Higher Education, have QA practices in place more consistently than those sectors without (e.g. secondary and non-formal education). In this light, the authors of the previously mentioned studies on QA in secondary and non-formal education respectively called for more integrated, EU-wide action.

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<sup>391</sup> 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."

<sup>392</sup> European Commission (2013). Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF – Update 2013.

## Use and Effects of Quality Assurance Principles

This section will be dedicated to analysing how the quality assurance principles are used in practice in countries, and what effects can be observed as a result of how they are used. Importantly, this section relies exclusively on data collected from the three case study countries, as well as the survey. That is because the literature consulted for the previous section, only speaks to whether QA mechanisms that are in accordance with the principles of provision MS3 exist, but not how these principles have been used. Additionally, the fact that, as expected, the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not trigger policy reform, does not answer how the principle of recommendations have been used, and whether they have effected any changes in thinking about QA. Hence, the following will explore whether this has indeed been the case.

This section's overall **conclusion** similarly finds that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has not triggered significant quality assurance-related policy developments across EQF countries, nor among the focus countries of this case study, Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, because these were already aligned to the EQF recommendation. However, the introduction of the EQF, as well as the 2017 EQF Recommendation, have triggered discussions around the standardisation of quality assurance across education sectors, as well as the role of QA in relation to NQFs and the respective countries' legal frameworks. Furthermore, identifiable trends in terms of QA-related discussions in the case study countries pertain to the role of informal learning and the NQFs' implicit role as a tool of external quality control.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

In **Germany**, all consulted stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), have highlighted the DQR's non-regulating nature. This means that, similar to the EQF at European-scale, the introduction of the DQR, and its referencing to the EQF in 2012, has not and could not have affected the institutional setup of Germany's QA systems. That is because the DQR's purpose, much like the EQF, is to foster comparability of and aid orientation within the German education system, as the responsibility for education, training, and qualifications is fragmented with different roles for the German states (school and academic education), the federal-level (role in vocational education and training), and other actors such as chambers (e.g. awarding qualifications resulting from dual learning). This extends to quality assurance practices, where each sector of education has had established QA mechanisms even before referencing to the EQF.

Despite the DQR's non-regulating character, the allocation of a qualification to the DQR is generally considered a quality label. That is because, according to stakeholder consensus, the DQR has contributed to making qualification descriptions more comparable and competence-oriented. This includes a shift towards competence and learning outcome-oriented curricula across educational sectors. In addition, the DQR and EQF have triggered the need for cross-sectoral collaboration for the introduction of new practices. In this context, the variety of Germany's quality assurance systems has been mentioned as an obstacle to the introduction of such new practices. In fact, developments surrounding the DQR seemed to have led to a debate among stakeholders as to whether QA practices should be harmonised across sectors. The primary argument against such harmonisation is that existing practices are well respected and widely trusted. The only sector with less trust is the NFIL sector, which is not as tightly governed, and quality assured. It also is not included in the DQR. Hence, there is a debate around what QA measures are needed to include NFIL qualifications in the DQR. Importantly, based on stakeholder opinions, none of these developments trace back to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Rather, the processes of establishing the DQR and referencing to the EQF as a whole have, and continue, to fuel these debates and developments. The only development that has been specifically linked to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, is that the QA principles as set out in

Annex IV have caused German QA systems to strengthen their focus on comprehensiveness – in particular, by paying more attention to aspects of QA that have previously not received much consideration, such as periodic review phases.

In the **Netherlands**, as per the 2011 NLQF referencing report, all qualifications outside of the formal education system must undergo a validity and levelling test. It is accepted by all interviewed stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), that all formal qualifications are formally subject to QA regulations and compliant with the EQF. Indeed, the Dutch Education Inspectorate – the Netherlands' key QA body – will use similar methods and procedures which ensure the correct use of academic and higher education degrees, before the introduction of the NLQF, to guarantee the correct use of NLQF levels for qualifications outside of the formal education system. This is foreseen by upcoming legal changes that will equip the NLQF with a legal basis in Dutch law.

One topic of debate that has emerged from the planned introduction of the NLQF act is the question as to whether the NLQF itself is a quality assurance framework for such qualifications. The legal-theoretical perspective is that it is not, according to representatives from the EQF national coordination point, as well as the NLQF referencing report. Practical perceptions, however, differ. That is because the validity and levelling tests required for the assignment of an NLQF level contain elements of QA. In addition, the Dutch government preferentially assigns funding to lifelong learning opportunities that are included in the NLQF as inclusion, and this is considered to be an indicator of assured quality. Further, interviewees from education providers and the economic sector have indicated that applying for inclusion to the NLQF has raised awareness to the need for focussing on QA procedures. Indeed, this informal but practical perception of the NLQF as a QA framework has led the Dutch Council of State to advise against the incorporation of the NLQF into educational law, as this would lead to the removal of the NFQL's informal role in QA. However, there are no signs that this debate on the NLQF's role in quality assurance or, indeed, the move to enshrine the NLQF in Dutch law, is the result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

In **Slovenia**, the situation, in terms of the use and effects of QA principles, is similar to the Netherlands in the sense that the SQF serves as a 'gatekeeper' to quality assurance. That is, by virtue of inclusion in the SQF, a qualification is assumed to be sufficiently quality assured. This approach has been formalised by the introduction of a standalone QA framework in February 2017. Key advances brought about by the introduction of the SQF, and the QA framework, are that all qualifications must be formulated in terms of learning outcomes and that new qualifications must be approved by a national professional commission, which consists of members from several relevant ministries. However, just as in Germany and the Netherlands, there is no evidence from the stakeholder consultation nor desk research that these developments are the result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, especially given that Slovenia's QA systems predate the 2017 Recommendation.

Meanwhile, the survey results do paint an overall positive picture of provision MS3. That is because 69 out of 104 respondents (67%) either agreed or strongly agreed that provision MS3 and Annex IV have strengthened links between QA systems and NQFs. The majority of respondents from these questions were from public institutions, although the distribution of responses is similar across respondents from public institutions, end beneficiaries, and education and training providers. The same generally holds when accounting for country size, for EU versus non-EU respondents, as well as respondents whose countries had referenced by the end of 2012 and 2017 respectively, and whose countries had not done so by 2012 and 2017 respectively. Further, when asked about the most important factors that explain the current state of implementation of the Recommendation, some respondents mentioned that it encouraged the development of new tools for QA in education.

## Assessment

Surrounding quality assurance in NQFs and the use of quality assurance principles, four points of note have emerged:

- The 2017 EQF Recommendation, itself, did not contribute to triggering policy developments or initiatives around the use of quality assurance principles, as the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not imply any practical changes with regard to quality assurance. However, the survey results do show that it has provided fertile ground for discussion and changes of mindsets, which could lead to policy change in time to come.
- The EQF's focus on quality assurance, as emphasised by provision MS3 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation did trigger policy debates in relation to QA systems in Germany and Netherlands, but not Slovenia.
- Inclusion of a qualification in an NQF is often considered a means of external quality assurance. That is because in Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, qualifications with associated EQF levels seem to be more trusted. The assumption behind this heightened trust is that such qualifications must be subject to high quality QA mechanisms.
- Debates on qualifications that are not part of the formal system seem to differ from country-to-country, most likely as a result of the lack of guidance on the inclusion of such qualifications in NQF. In Germany, the sector is not as tightly governed as other sectors are and is, therefore, not as well quality assured nor trusted. The Netherlands, meanwhile, subject such qualifications to rigorous testing before assigning them an EQF level.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study has dealt with the state of implementation of provision MS3 and Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as well as the use and effect of quality assurance principles contained within said recommendation. The evidence drawn from country case studies, the survey, and European-level desk research, however, paints a mixed, albeit unsurprising, picture:

- The 2017 EQF Recommendation has not triggered new policy developments, or initiatives concerning QA systems in any country covered by the EQF, because these systems were already in place. As such, the 2017 EQF Recommendation aligned its QA approach to existing practice. This is exemplified by Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, where ESG and EQAVET-compliant QA systems predate the 2017 EQF Recommendation and, at least in the case of Germany, the introduction of EQF itself.
- The EQF's focus on quality assurance, as emphasised by provision MS3 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, did trigger policy debates in two of the three case study countries (Germany and Netherlands). In Germany, the introduction of the EQF and DQR raised awareness for the need of intersectoral cooperation for the introduction of new practices. In the Netherlands, the question as to whether a qualification's admission into the NLQF is, or should be, a mechanism of quality assurance emerged.
- All three case studies share that their respective NQFs themselves serve a quality assurance function, as a qualification's inclusion in the respective NQF is seen as a label of quality by relevant stakeholders in all three countries studied (public

authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries).

Importantly, none of these developments uniquely trace back to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as said Recommendation was not meant to effect major changes in terms of QA. It sought to finetune existing provisions that date back to the 2008 EQF Recommendation and relate QA to qualifications, rather than to systems. In that sense, QA developments are perhaps better understood as products of the EQF process as a whole, as opposed to individual Recommendations.

Lessons learned from the case study reflect on the 2017 EQF Recommendation's current state, and possible future developments:

- Despite not having led to concrete policy actions, provision MS3 might still have led policy makers to update their perspectives on QA. The relevant survey results are the clearest indicator for this. There is also potential for future policy developments. The survey has shown that the Recommendation has led some respondents to consider the development and implementation of new QA tools.
- There seem to be differences in the coherence of QA efforts across sectors of education, despite the EQF. VET and Higher Education seem to be more coherently and consistently quality assured than secondary and non-formal education, most likely due to the existence of dedicated European QA frameworks. Hence, European-wide coordination efforts focussing on secondary and non-formal education could lead to greater coordination.
- In all three case study countries, a qualification's very inclusion in the NQF is seen as a hallmark of quality. In a way, the EQF/NQFs seems to act as a kind of external quality assurance mechanism of its own right.

## Case study topic 5: Credit Systems

This case study analyses to what extent provision MS4 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which refers to the promotion of links between credit systems, and NQF and consideration of the common principles on credit systems referred to in Annex V,<sup>393</sup> has been implemented. It also considers criterion three of Annex III, which stresses that NQFs and their qualifications should be related, where appropriate, to credit systems.<sup>394</sup> Links between credit systems and qualifications frameworks can better facilitate student and labour mobility, recognition of qualifications, the development of flexible learning pathways, and more. This case study therefore looks at the promotion of links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks (section 1), and how principles of credit systems are used, and what effects are observed as a result of their use (section 2).

This case study approach brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. Three supporting country case studies have been conducted in France, Ireland, and Portugal. In total, 20 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic, as well as additional written contributions to the study team's requests. These inputs are used as a basis and reviewed against the findings of desk research, and additional existing insights gained through interviews with stakeholders. Among 20 stakeholders consulted, 11 represent authorities working with

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<sup>393</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).

<sup>394</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ4 (4.4a); EQ5 (5.5b).

qualifications, six – education and training providers, one – end beneficiaries, one – public authorities, and the remaining one – other EQF stakeholder (institute for professional training representative).

These three countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, and feature two different skills formation systems (statist and liberal). All three countries are in the operational stage of the NQF, with Ireland undergoing review, and all referenced their EQF before 2017 (France in 2012, updated in 2021; Ireland in 2009, updated in 2020; and Portugal in 2011).

## Credit systems

This section brings together the evidence to assess the extent to which provision MS4 (credit systems) has been implemented. It focuses on the progress and development of credit systems linked to NQFs since the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Therefore, this section focuses on the number of countries that promoted links between credit systems and NQFs, and the development between 2017 and 2021. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017 and developments since then are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the provision to link credit systems to the NQF is assessed as implemented as it already reflected the status quo in 2017, and was not expected to lead to changes in practice. The evidence gathered suggests that the majority of EQF countries had already linked credit systems to their NQFs prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Marginal changes, which were observed since 2017<sup>395</sup> (in the Netherlands and Lithuania), which link HE or VET credit systems to the NQF are associated to national legal changes unrelated to the EQF<sup>396</sup>. In a small share of countries, where credit systems were not identified or were not linked to NQF, work to develop credit frameworks or link credit systems to NQF is ongoing (e.g. Slovakia,<sup>397</sup> Austria,<sup>398</sup> Serbia,<sup>399</sup> and Turkey<sup>400</sup>), suggesting that progress was achieved. At the same time, it is not possible to establish a direct causal link between this progress and the 2017 EQF Recommendation, due to a lack of available information and reporting on the development of credit systems. The difficulty to establish a link is also confirmed by the consultations at country-level, which did not indicate that the 2017 EQF Recommendation impacted the progress or implementation of credit systems linked to the NQF. However, it should be noted that the consulted countries in the case study are all in the operational stage of NQF and have credit systems established in either HE, VET, or both, and, thus, may not reflect the situation and EQF impact in countries with less developed NQFs. This may impact the conclusions of this case study.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

2020 NQF inventory reports were used to source relevant and up-to-date information for country mapping, however, links between credit systems are not always evident. Additional information was taken from EQF referencing reports for each country, where available.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> As documented in the main report. Observations are based on Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2017).

<sup>396</sup> In the Netherlands the legal change focuses on specifying the credits for associate degrees, a type of qualification that had been included in the NQF, but not yet defined as qualification in the law on HE. In Lithuania, the change is related to a new opportunity to gain credits for certain VET modules in the general education curriculum.

<sup>397</sup> In Slovakia, a 2019 Act on Pedagogical and Professional Staff (138/2019) abolished the heavily criticised credit system previously applied to VET. See: Cedefop (2021). Vocational education and training in Europe - Slovakia. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/slovakia-u2>

<sup>398</sup> Qualifikations register (n.d.). Validation. <https://www.qualifikationsregister.at/en/der-nqr/validierung/>

<sup>399</sup> Ministry Of Education, Science and Technological Development (2019). Report on Referencing National Qualification Framework of the Republic of Serbia to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and Self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. [https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2022-05/Serbia\\_Referencing\\_Report%5B1%5D.pdf](https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2022-05/Serbia_Referencing_Report%5B1%5D.pdf)

<sup>400</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Turkey. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/turkey-2020>

<sup>401</sup> Europass. EQF Referencing Reports. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/eqf-referencing-reports>

Where information relating credit systems to NQFs is available, it was found through desk research that, before 2017, a total of 22 countries have developed credit systems linked to NQF in HE and 14 in VET<sup>402</sup>. According to country mapping, two countries, Lithuania and the Netherlands, implemented changes which link credit systems to NQF since 2017, although it remains unknown to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to this progress. In 2019, Lithuania introduced changes, which linked formal IVET learning credits to the NQF.<sup>403</sup> In the Netherlands, since 2017, there have been ongoing developments of a credit system which applies to all educational sectors and links to the NLQF.<sup>404</sup>

VET credit systems were identified less often than HE credit systems, with several countries having systems in HE related to NQF but not in VET. Mapping of EQF countries<sup>405</sup> shows that credit systems continue to be implemented, reformed and, in one example (Slovakia<sup>406</sup>), abolished. In some countries there is expressed interest in progressing the development of credit systems (e.g. Austria,<sup>407</sup> Serbia,<sup>408</sup> and Turkey<sup>409</sup>).

## Assessment

The desk review shows that before 2017 most countries had already linked credit systems with NQF. Since 2017 there have been two further countries, which had linked either HE or VET credit systems with NQF (Netherlands and Lithuania). Looking specifically at the countries examined in this case study, the country mapping identified HE and VET credit systems linked to NQF in France and Ireland. In Portugal a credit system in VET linked to NQF was identified, but not in HE. Based on inputs from national experts from these countries, progress is ongoing as the countries continue to develop credit system frameworks, and further integrate them within their NQFs or have expressed intentions to do so.

- In **France**, while a credit system has been in place since before 2017, from January 2019, it became a requirement that all certifications listed in the national register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) are structured into units or blocks of competencies, which can then be credited as a means to validate non-formal and informal learning, including qualifications recognised by the state and social partners.<sup>410</sup> However, this development is unrelated to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Interviewees from relevant national public authorities in France expressed that a credit system contradicts the idea of learning outcomes because its quantification is based on workloads and training hours. However, where applied, these are complementary to each other. For example, in VET, qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes and grouped by units which allow for partial validations and pathways between different qualifications.

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<sup>402</sup> In total, 22 countries have developed credit systems linked to NQF in HE before 2017 (BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, HR, DK, EE, FI, FR, IE, LV, LU, MT, SK, SI, AL, BA, IS, LI, NO, MK, ME, RS, XK) and 14 in VET before 2017 (BG, HR, EE, FI, FR, IE, LU, MT, PT, SI, IS, MK, ME, XK). Credit systems related to NQF's in HE or VET were not identified in 14 countries (AT, BE-de, CY, CZ, DE, EL, HU, IT, PL, RO, ES, SE, TR, and CH).

<sup>403</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Lithuania. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/lithuania-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>404</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Netherlands. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/netherlands-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>405</sup> Based on Cedefop 2020 NQF inventory reports

<sup>406</sup> In Slovakia, a 2019 Act on Pedagogical and Professional Staff (138/2019) abolished the heavily criticised credit system previously applied to VET. See: Cedefop (2021). Vocational education and training in Europe - Slovakia. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/slovakia-u2>

<sup>407</sup> Qualifikationsregister (n.d.). Validation. <https://www.qualifikationsregister.at/en/der-nqr/validierung/>

<sup>408</sup> Ministry Of Education, Science and Technological Development (2019). Report on Referencing National Qualification Framework of the Republic of Serbia to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and Self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. [https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2022-05/Serbia\\_Referencing\\_Report%5B1%5D.pdf](https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2022-05/Serbia_Referencing_Report%5B1%5D.pdf)

<sup>409</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Turkey. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/turkey-2020>

<sup>410</sup> Cedefop (2021). Vocational education and training in Europe - France. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/france-u2>



- In **Ireland**, there is a well-established credit system, but respondents (including public authority, HE, and recruitment representatives), agree that the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation has had little influence on its development or progression. A national approach, concerned with the access, transfer, and progression of credit, was developed following the establishment of the NQF in 2003. In HE, ECTS are widely used, and the credit system is well evolved in HE for major awards. However, as the universities, technological universities, and Institutes of Technology are statutory awarding bodies, they have the authority to make their own awards. The Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) policies do not provide expansive detail on credits for non-major awards, which has led to inconsistency for learners, as non-major awards can be given similar titles to major awards but exist at different NQF levels (e.g. professional certificate or professional diploma).
- In **Portugal**, there has been a national credit system for VET linked to the NQF since before 2017, but not for HE. The establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (Quadro Nacional de Qualificações), in Portugal, was proposed in a package of a VET reform, initiated in 2007<sup>411</sup>. It aims to drive the process of reform and seeks to link the qualifications from various education sub-systems in a coherent classification. The overall system for qualifications consists of a NQF, a national qualifications catalogue (Catálogo nacional de qualificações), a national credit system for VET (Sistema Nacional de Créditos do Ensino e Formação Profissionais), and an instrument for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The 2007 system was reformed in January 2017 and predates the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Its publication followed a national review of developments since its initial introduction in 2007 and does not explicitly mention the 2008 EQF Recommendation. Together with the introduction of the Qualifica programme, the national credit system for Vocational Education and Training (Sistema Nacional de Créditos do Ensino e Formação Profissional), was included in legislation (Portaria nº 47/2017, de 4 de fevereiro).

All three countries included in this case study are in the operational stage of NQF development. The developments of their credit systems are not connected to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but rather to national reforms. For example, in **Ireland**, the forthcoming Listed Awarding Body Scheme will enable a wider range of professional, sectoral, and international bodies to make awards on the NFQ. It will require QQI to streamline communications in relation to the NFQ and, specifically, credits. Both HE and Further Education and Training (FET) credits will be implemented by new awarding bodies, not just the QQI and will comply with the ECTS principles. In both **Portugal** and **France** credit systems are not applied in both HE and VET, only in one or the other. This presents opportunities for future development in consideration of the EQF, although this was not explicitly cited.

Desk research highlighted that the landscape of credit systems in HE and VET can be complex and operated by various stakeholders, at different levels and sectors. National stakeholders from the case study countries (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), also highlight the nuanced landscape of credit systems in the national context:

- In **Ireland**, in FET the current Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System has been designed to complement the NFQ, and the use of NFQ award-types. As the QQI is the only awarding body, this makes it easier to monitor than the complex HE system. Léargas manages these processes, being the National Agency for Erasmus+, and, therefore, responsible for international and national exchange programmes in education, youth and community work, and vocational education and training.

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<sup>411</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020 – Portugal](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office.

- In **Portugal**, the Qualifica programme and the national credit system for Vocational Education and Training (Sistema Nacional de Créditos do Ensino e Formação Profissional), are linked. Qualifica aims at opening-up the system of qualifications to a recognition of prior learning, which the introduction of a national credit system for VET further supports. A public authority representative perceived that this enables the broader rollout of modularisation in vocation education and training, and has the goal of increasing mobility and flexibility in the provision of vocational education in Portugal. In its design it is aligned with ECVET principles, and aimed at increasing permeability between VET pathways and higher education. The system of higher education, concerning qualifications at levels 6-8 of the NQF, follows a different credit system, with its own set of principles based on the ECTS.

These examples point to the complexities of how credit systems are situated within a larger framework and how they are integrated within multiple national bodies. Within this landscape, the 2017 EQF Recommendations may not be prioritised over already established practices and governance. This potentially reduces the impact or relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and could explain why national experts in these country examples do not see the influence of the EQF on credit systems. Stakeholder views reflect that provisions in the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not trigger reforms, and the gathered information shows that, while the 2017 EQF Recommendation aims to increase the links of credit systems to NQF, many countries have already established such links, and as would be expected, only marginal changes since 2017 have been observed.

### Principles for credit systems

This section brings together the evidence to assess how the principles for credit systems are used in practice in countries and what effects can be observed as a result. The 2017 EQF Recommendation defined seven principles for credit systems related to NQFs or systems referenced to the EQF. In short, these included supporting flexible learning pathways, using the learning outcomes approach to facilitate qualifications transfer and progression across national and international borders, transparent quality assurance, that credit should be well documented and have synergies with validation arrangements, and be developed and improved through cooperation between stakeholders.<sup>412</sup> Therefore, this section focuses on evidence of credit principles in use and any observable effects.

As overall **conclusion**, no link could be identified from the evidence to suggest that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has contributed to the implementation of principles for credit systems set forth in Annex V of the Recommendation. Importantly, the annex presents broad criteria, which cater for different approaches to credit systems and reflect the status quo of already established credit system principles in 2017. This is evident in countries with operational frameworks, such as those included in this case study. Despite the nuances of each countries credit systems, each have principles developed without an evident link to EQF which align with those in Annex V. Moreover, country profiles suggest that there can be nuances in the interpretation of what constitutes a credit system (e.g. France), how it operates, and the principles applied, which is not guided by the EQF or its recommendations. However, indications of synergies between some credit systems (e.g. Belgium, Latvia, Denmark, Estonia),<sup>413</sup> and the recommended principles were noted in desk research, which have contributed to more flexible learning pathways, student and labour mobility, and recognition of prior learning. Country consultations similarly indicated synergies between approaches to credit systems and the outlined principles of credit described in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Given that each country represented in this case study is in the operational stage of NQF development, it could be concluded that, where there are established credit systems in HE or VET, many principles are inherently present. However, the developments of these principles are unrelated to the 2017 EQF

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<sup>412</sup> C 189/15.

<sup>413</sup> Based on Cedefop 2020 NQF inventories

Recommendation, indicating that the EQF has had no impact in guiding the development of credit principles in these countries, but instead formalised existing practices and can work to ensure coherence and alignment across credit systems.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Desk review revealed limited information relating to the application of principles for credit systems (as referenced in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation), in practice. There is no explicit reference to credit principles in 2020 NQF inventories, or post-2017 EQF reference reports. However, there are many examples of cross-over between the principles applied by credit systems and the principles set forth in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. For example, several NQFs referenced adopting the learning outcomes approach in specific relation to credit systems (Belgium – Flemish Community,<sup>414</sup> and Belgium – French Community<sup>415</sup>), as well as flexible learning pathways (Latvia<sup>416</sup>), and cooperation with stakeholders (Ireland<sup>417</sup>).

While effects from the use of credit principles in practice were challenging to discern from the limited available data, some broader impacts of credit systems were noted, such as more flexible learning pathways and recognition of prior learning, but these were not directly associated with the 2017 EQF Recommendation<sup>418</sup>.

## Assessment

In the survey, around half of respondents (58 of 104 (56%), of which 41 (71%) were public authorities and 9 (16%) were education or training providers), agreed or strongly agreed that guidance provided by the 2017 EQF Recommendation Annex V has contributed to increased opportunities for the transfer of learning outcomes across different education sectors through credit systems. Twenty-three of 104 (22%) respondents tend to disagree with this statement. While these responses of the survey were not reflected in the desk review, stakeholders from France (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications), indicated that the credit system (with its own inherently present principles), had contributed to transferable units across qualifications. Moreover, national experts in Ireland and Portugal similarly expressed that there are existing overlapping themes in national approaches to credit systems, and the principles of credit outlined in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

- In **France**, the long existing ECTS system has contributed to the establishment of flexible career pathways and facilitated student mobility, both internally and externally. As expressed in the country case study, competence blocs applied in HE allows for transferrable units across qualifications and the system meets many of the credit principles defined in Annex V. Despite the synergies between competence blocs and the described credit principles, national stakeholders interviewed during the case study do not consider this to be defined as a 'credit system'.
- In **Ireland**, the recommended EQF credit principles are regarded as easily complied with as the credit system is well established and functioning, consistent with

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<sup>414</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Belgium. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/belgium-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>415</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Belgium. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/belgium-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>416</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Iceland. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/iceland-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>417</sup> Cedefop (2021). European inventory on NQF 2020 – Ireland. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/ireland-european-inventory-nqf-2020>

<sup>418</sup> As examples (gathered from Cedefop 2020 NQF inventories), in Denmark, it is indicated in that credit assessments and validation of prior learning will improve the opportunities available between education and the labour market, promoting lifelong learning, and in Estonia, the use of credits facilitates the recognition of prior learning and more flexible learning pathways.

European principles.<sup>419</sup> The recently established Irish Qualifications and Quality Forum (IQQF) met in October 2022, and agreed that there is need to go ‘back to basics’ with the NFQ and revitalise the original principles while ensuring that the basic principles, including credits, titling conventions, award types, etc., are properly conveyed. Although, there is no indication this is related to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

- In **Portugal**, there are several overlapping principles between the approach defined for the Portuguese VET credit system, as introduced in early 2017, and the 2017 EQF Recommendation on credit principles.

Identified overlapping principles are elaborated in more detail in Table 23 below. In France, Ireland, and Portugal it can be seen that almost all of the principles of credit, as referenced in Annex V, are present in credit systems. The identification of overarching principles of credit by national experts and desk review indicate that the principles of credit, outlined in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, are already inherently present in established credit frameworks. This shows that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has formalised existing practices. Therefore, it is expected that the 2017 EQF Recommendation would not have a direct impact, but rather that the recommended principles of credit work to ensure coherence across a broad range of approaches to credit systems.

**Table 23. How case study countries comply with principles of credit systems (Annex V)**

Principles of credit (Annex V)	France	Ireland	Portugal
Credit systems should support flexible learning pathways, for the benefit of individual learners.	Competence blocs allow learners to accumulate qualification units over time, to transfer learning outcomes and to apply for partial validation of prior learning.	In FET, a key principle is transferability, enabling learners to move.	VET principles promote the flexibility of qualification paths and individualised learning pathways that can lead to final certification.
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.	Learning outcomes are systematically implemented in VET and nowadays also in HE.	Many universities now offer ‘exit’ credits awards which reflect the credit volume achieved by the student on departure. In FET students can acquire ‘minor awards’ on the way to achieving a ‘major award’.	VET principles enable the understanding of the (to be) achieved learning outcomes, through quantitative measures.
Credit systems should facilitate transfer of learning outcomes and progression of learners across institutional and national borders.	Learning outcomes facilitate international mobility.	ECVET points are assigned for international mobility; people receive a mobility certificate alongside their qualification, managed by Léargas (the National Agency for Erasmus+).	VET principles re-affirm the value for certified learning within the scope of NQF as well as lifelong learning outside the scope of NQF, by permitting certification within the framework of the national qualification system.
Credit systems should be underpinned by explicit and transparent quality assurance.	Quality assurance mechanisms are applied, especially when qualifications are included in national registers. <sup>420</sup>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are responsible for the transparent and external quality assurance of HE and FET.	VET principles indirectly relate to this principle through the re-affirming of the value of relevant and quality lifelong learning outside the scope of NQF.
The credit acquired by an individual should be documented, expressing the acquired learning outcomes, the name of the competent credit awarding	Validated competence blocs are documented.	In FET, the assignment of credit values to awards provides transparency to the size and shape of awards and helps learners, employers, and other users	In VET principles the learning outcomes are not explicitly mentioned in the document but can be found through the national catalogue.

<sup>419</sup> QQI (2020). The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA. P.83. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/NFQ%20Referencing%20Report%2012-2020.pdf>

<sup>420</sup> For example, when qualifications are registered in the national register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) and the specific register of accreditations and certifications for qualifications complementary to a profession (RS).

Principles of credit (Annex V)	France	Ireland	Portugal
institution and, where relevant, the related credit value.		to relate awards to each other in a meaningful way.	
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.	Competence blocs support the partial validation of prior learning.	The credit ranges and values for all QQI award-types are set at a national level. This ensures credit value stability when the minor awards are exchanged or are transferred across major awards.	If access to qualification is done through the recognition, validation, and certification of professional competences (RVCC), certification is based on an assessment of learning outcomes and the credit points corresponding to the total or part of the short-term training units.
Credit systems should be developed and improved through cooperation between stakeholders at the appropriate national and Union levels.		The QQI cooperates and communicates with relevant stakeholders.	This is not formally mentioned, but ANQEP works together with relevant stakeholders.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study dealt with the question to what extent provision MS4 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation (credit systems) has been implemented and how the principles for credit systems are used in practice in countries, and what effects can be observed as a result of how they are used.

Altogether, the case study shows that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has had little impact on the implementation of credit systems or use of principles of credit. This is to be expected, given that the provision on credit systems reflects the status quo in 2017, and that the outlined principles in Annex V are broad enough to reflect the different approaches to credit systems. Importantly, gathered evidence<sup>421</sup> suggests that the implementation of credit systems was carried out in many countries prior to 2017, but that progress is ongoing as credit systems in HE and VET are developed or enhanced. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that there is thematic overlap with the principles established within credit systems of the countries represented in this case study and the principles of credit outlined in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. As the credit systems in the countries included in this case study were established before the 2017 EQF Recommendation, no link can be established between their principles and the principles outlined in Annex V. This, however, may differ in countries at less advanced stages of NQF development and implementation, where the outlined principles in Annex V provides broad guidance, which reflects the landscape of established principles and ensures cohesion across credit systems.

Some beneficial impacts of identified overlapping principles from the desk review suggest that, in general, principles of credit are relevant to enhancing flexible learning pathways and mobility of learners and workers. It was also conveyed through the Irish country case that, to enhance common interpretation and communication between relevant stakeholders, the better establishment and dissemination of 'principles' might be a means to streamline processes and understanding. This notion is also relevant to countries with less developed NQFs (not included in this case study), whereby the 2017 EQF Recommendation can act as a cohesive guide when reforming or linking credit systems to NQF.

However, it was also noted that credit systems are sometimes enacted across several authorities, complicating the landscape, and introducing challenges in the interpretation of

<sup>421</sup> 2020 NQF inventory reports and EQF referencing reports.

credit system use and principles. Even in countries with operational NQFs, stakeholders do not always recognise their frameworks as being defined as ‘credit systems’ (e.g. France). In these instances, the 2017 EQF Recommendation may not effectively communicate its relevance. In the future, as several countries have indicated their intentions to link credit systems to NQF, or introduce credit systems within HE and VET, the EQF principles of credit could help to facilitate the development of such systems in context of national frameworks.

## Case study topic 6: Databases and registers

This case study analyses to what extent countries use databases and registers in line with 2017 EQF Recommendation, and its developments since then<sup>422</sup>. Particularly, it looks into the implementation of provision MS5 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which refers to countries ensuring that newly issued qualification documents and/or registers of qualifications make reference to EQF levels<sup>423</sup> (section 2). It also covers the status of provision MS6a, which relates to making the results of the referencing process publicly available at national- and-Union levels, and MS6b which refers to making information about the level of qualifications and their learning outcomes available via registers and databases, making use of data fields as presented in Annex VI<sup>424</sup> (section 3). Lastly, the effectiveness of qualification information in reaching and informing stakeholders is discussed.

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey and PC results. Seven countries are included in the case study: Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. In total 61 interviewees (organised as a one-on-one or group interviews), participated in the country-level consultations on this topic<sup>425</sup>. Among 61 stakeholders consulted eight represent public authorities, 22 – authorities working with qualifications, 20 – education and training providers, nine – end beneficiaries, and the remaining two – other EQF stakeholders (institute for professional training representative and National Centre for Climate Change representative).

The seven countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the type of skills-formation system, the development stage of the NQF, and whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review<sup>426</sup>. More specifically on the topic of this case study, selected countries offer a variety of different development stages in terms of qualification registers and databases and the use of Annex VI. Five out of seven selected countries already had respective qualifications registers and databases developed before 2017. Two countries have either recently introduced such database (Ireland), or have recently undergone a major development phase (Sweden). In addition, out of five countries, which already had databases developed, two offer a certain level of complexity by using not one but two (Portugal), and three (Romania), different registers and databases respectively, which is described further in the text. To add, countries also vary by their use of data fields in line with Annex VI. For instance:

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<sup>422</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ 4 (4.5a, 4.6a, 4.6b); EQ 5 (5.3b, 5.3d).

<sup>423</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> See more details on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview of the type of organisations consulted.

<sup>426</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.

- In **Ireland**, the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) was established in 2020, offering a definitive list of qualifications recognised on the NFQ and linked to the European Qualifications Dataset Register. Currently IRQ meets required data field requirements recommended by Annex VI only to some extent and optional ones – at minimum.
- In **Lithuania**, the national register of study and training programmes was established in 2010 and reorganised into a register of studies, training programmes and qualifications in 2015. The data published on the publicly available AIKOS portal meets Annex VI requirements to a large extent. Qualification information is also transferred to Europass portal.

## Referencing to EQF in qualification documents and registers

This section aims to answer the question ‘to what extent has provision MS5 been implemented?’ by looking into the developments on providing a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level, in newly issued qualification documents and/or qualification registers. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017, and developments since then are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests that 2017 EQF provision MS5 was implemented to a large extent. Since 2017, a significant number of EU-27 (12), and non-EU countries (four), have started referencing EQF in their qualification documents. For the qualifications registers and databases, somewhat smaller, yet significant, progress can be seen as 10 more EU-27 countries, and three more non-EU countries, started referencing EQF levels in their databases. Only a small number of countries have not yet started progressing in this direction: two EU-27 and three non-EU countries in terms of qualification documents, and six EU-27 and six non-EU countries in terms of referencing EQF in their respective databases. In the context of the case study, consultations showed that a certain level of complexity is involved when it comes to qualification documents broken down by education-level. Certain developments are needed in all levels of education to ensure that the 2017 EQF provision MS5 is fully implemented. For example, developments are needed to ensure that general education qualification documents include references to EQF, as well as Doctoral degree diplomas/certificates and/or diploma/certificate supplements. This situation is mainly attributed to a lack of development in respective level of qualification in NQFs. In VET, many case study countries have referenced EQF in qualification documents before the 2017 EQF Recommendation. When it comes to the impact, a link between national developments and the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be attributed in four out of seven countries where a revision of qualification documents and/or databases was done.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Provision MS5 puts an emphasis on two sources, where a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level can be provided. Firstly, in all newly issued qualification documents (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or, secondly, in qualifications registers and databases. Although no definition for “qualifications database” or “qualifications register” exists, the following definitions are applied in this case study: the database can be defined as a large collection of data organised for rapid search and retrieval by a computer software,<sup>427</sup> and a register is a collection of public records which is often used as a system to register certain items (e.g. qualifications, study programmes, teachers), and can be based on existing legislation and predetermined data fields. The terms ‘database’ and ‘register’ are not further distinguished in the case study, and are used interchangeably without going into detail. Table 24 below provides an overview of the

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<sup>427</sup> Merriam-webster.com (n.d.). Definition of Database. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/database>

situation in 2017, and the developments since then among EU-27 Member States and non-EU countries.

**Table 24. Overview of the situation in 2017 and the developments since then among EU-27 Member States (MS) and non-EU countries**

	Situation in 2017	Developments after 2017
Referencing to EQF levels in the qualification documents	in 15 (52%) EU-27 and in four (36%) non-EU countries all newly issued qualifications made reference to EQF.	12 more EU-27 (86% of remaining) countries and four (57% of remaining) non-EU countries begun to make reference to EQF levels on newly issued qualifications.
Referencing to EQF levels in the national registers of qualifications	13 EU-27 (45%) and two (18%) non-EU country referenced EQF in their national register of qualifications.	10 more EU-27 (63% of remaining) and three (33% of remaining) non-EU country begun referencing to EQF levels in their national registers of qualifications.

*Note on the United Kingdom;* The UK withdrew from the EU in January 2020, since then the UK is not part of the EQF process anymore. Information on the UK is not included in the tables.

*Source:* situation in 2017: authors, based on Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries<sup>428</sup>. Developments after: authors, based on EQF AG note on national developments (59-2).

## Assessment

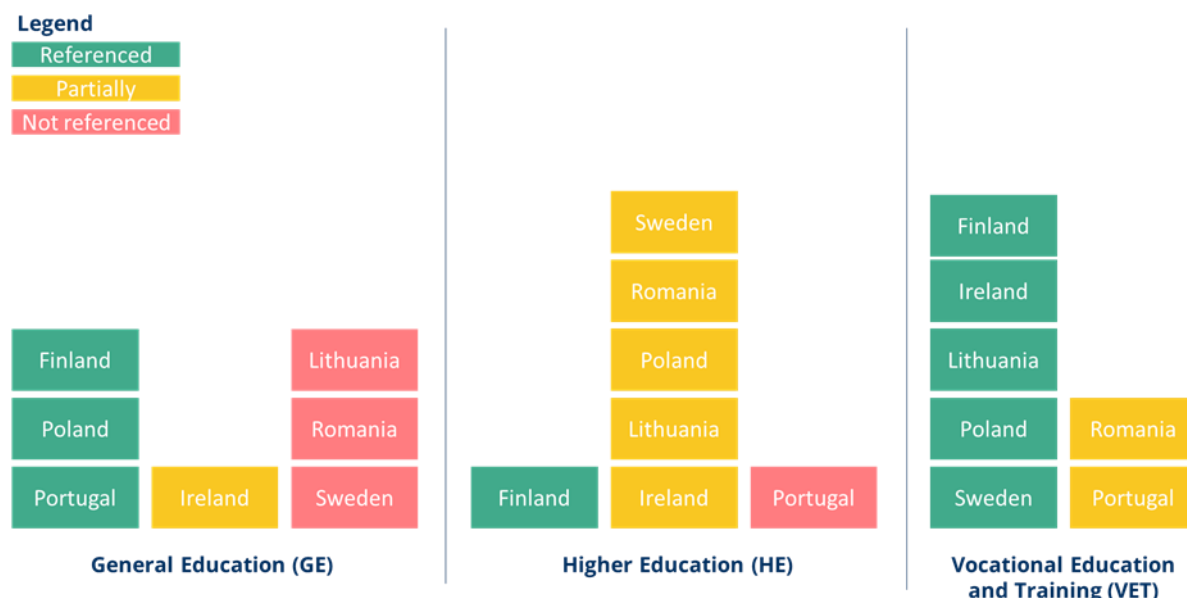
Based on the desk research, a significant improvement can be seen. Since 2017, 86% of EU-27 and 57% of non-EU countries, which have not referenced EQF levels prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, have started referencing EQF levels on the respective qualification documents. Certain improvements are still needed in two remaining EU-27 (Spain, Belgium[de]), and two non-EU (Serbia, Albania) countries. Spain, as well as the German speaking community in Belgium, have not yet finalised referencing NQF to EQF and therefore cannot include EQF levels on qualification documents at this stage. In Serbia and Albania, the status relates to recent national developments – both countries finalised the referencing process with an acceptance of the referencing reports in 2020 and 2021, respectively. In addition, a significant development can be seen since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as 63% of EU-27 remaining countries started referencing EQF levels in their national registers of qualifications, including 33% of remaining non-EU countries.

Various reasons can be attributed as to why the EQF is not referenced in the qualification documents and/or databases and barriers exist which hinder the full implementation of such a measure. The country consultations brought together insights on certain developments noted below. When it comes to referencing to EQF in the qualification documents, an overview of the countries selected for the case study can be seen in Figure 32. Furthermore, an assessment of the situation per education sector is provided.

<sup>428</sup> Cedefop (2018). National qualifications framework developments in European countries: analysis and overview 2015-16. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 65, page 13



**Figure 32. Overview of countries selected for the case study: countries which have referenced / partially referenced / fully referenced EQF in the qualification documents of general, higher or vocational education and training.**



Note: 'partially' means that certain qualification documents do not provide a reference to an EQF or there is another limitation to classify it as 'fully referenced' as described in the accompanying text below the chart. Source: authors based on the national expert input.

#### Referencing to EQF levels on the general education qualification documents

Advantageous aspects can be attributed to the developments of referencing EQF in general education (GE) qualification documents. For example, in **Finland**, a revision of certificates was influenced by the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and organised in August 2017 to ensure that basic and upper secondary education certificates include references to EQF/NQF levels. In **Portugal**, changes were introduced in 2021, when a legislative instrument defining basic education (level 2), and secondary education (levels 3 and 4) qualifications was introduced, putting a requirement to reference to both NQF and EQF levels. In **Poland**, most of the diplomas and certificates already included a reference to EQF since 2015. This includes selected diplomas in general education, for example lower and upper secondary education diplomas. In **Ireland**, only documents issued by the state agency Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) include a reference to EQF. Stimulated by the EQF and the European Diploma Supplement, a cost-benefit analysis for the State Examination Commission – the issuer of school leaving certificates, was conducted. Following the analysis, a decision was made that examination results, rather than qualification level per se, are the key determinant of entry to HE. Therefore, it was determined that the cost of specifying the level of EQF on school leaving certificates outweighed the benefits of doing so, and HE institutions would in any case understand the level of qualification sufficiently.

Certain underlying barriers can be identified as to why countries are lacking in ensuring that the EQF is clearly referenced in GE qualification documents. One such reason is the development of certain levels of NQF. For example, in **Lithuania**, the NQF has been seen as more instrumental in VET and HE sectors, and oriented towards career and labour market. At the time of this report, learning outcomes of lower and upper secondary general education programmes were linked to LTQF levels 3 and 4 respectively, however, this is not indicated in the qualification documents. To add, there have been ongoing changes in the curricula for a few years (e.g. defining the learning outcomes), however no active discussions on referencing LTQF/EQF in GE qualification documents are happening. In **Sweden**, the Sweden's Qualification Framework (SeQF) has not reached an operational stage yet, despite being introduced in 2015. As such, it has not yet had a great impact on

qualification documents. In addition, competence standards set in legal acts do not clearly match the skills, knowledge, and competences defined in EQF and NQF, and learning outcomes are not formulated with a clear reference to NQF.

Another common barrier is fragmentation in the overall education system and lack of coherent legislation. For example, in **Romania**, a Governmental Decision, regarding the approval of the content and format of qualification documents in GE, has at least 29 annexes. The feedback on the abundance of ministerial orders and governmental decisions, as well as different methodologies used to establish the content of certificates and diplomas, was received by the two ministries in charge of the NQF implementation (the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour). There are ongoing discussions to issue a new law on education at national level. The new law would include the necessity to put in one place and form the provision regarding the EQF/NQF reference on all newly issued qualifications documents, regardless of the level. However, such a process is often lengthy and entails extensive negotiations between different categories of stakeholders.

Therefore, certain drivers are involved when it comes to referencing EQF in qualification documents of GE. These include a lack of development of NQF in the level of GE, fragmentation, and a lack of coherence in GE legislation, and autonomy of awarding bodies. In the three countries, where EQF is referenced in respective qualification documents, GE qualifications are developed as part of NQF, therefore a direct reference to EQF can be made.

#### Referencing to EQF levels on the higher education qualification documents

As in GE, Finland conducted a comprehensive review in August 2017 revising the guidelines for Diploma Supplements ensuring that information on NQF and EQF levels is present in Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral degree diploma supplements. The competence-based approach in HE in **Finland** was adopted later than in VET (late 1990s), but the development has been systemic, and the process has intensified in recent years. In **Sweden**, according to the 2022 Cedefop Inventory, the indication of NQF level is not yet available on all diploma supplements, similar situation is seen in the case of EQF, which levels are featured only on some certificates or diplomas.

For countries included in this case study, there is room for certain improvements. In particular, further developments can be made with EQF level 8. For example, in **Lithuania** and **Romania**, the EQF/NQF is not referenced in Doctoral diplomas and/or Diploma Supplements. According to interviews, during the initial NQF to EQF referencing, Lithuania lacked experience in describing level 8 qualifications. Since then (2012), experience has been gained and the country plans to pay increased attention to this element when updating its referencing report. In **Romania**, there has not yet been any governmental decision to establish the content and the format of a PhD diploma or a supplement, which would provide a clear reference to NQF/EQF. This is the case despite such decisions existing for Bachelor (since 2014), and Master (since 2016), and post-university study programmes (level 6) (since 2019), qualification documents.

In **Ireland**, a similar situation can be seen, as in the case of GE. Here, the NQF and EQF levels are referenced in standard Europass Diploma Supplements, whereas degree parchments (certificates, diplomas) lack reference to EQF. Issuing HE institutions are designated awarding bodies and have autonomy over degree diplomas. In **Poland**, improvements are yet to be made in referencing NQF and EQF in certain diplomas issued after a postgraduate non-degree studies (*studia podyplomowe*). A lot of room for improvement remains in **Portugal**, where no legislation foresees a systemic presentation of NQF/EQF levels in HE qualification documents. However, such policy ambition was expressed by consulted national representatives, and Portugal aims to continue expending NQF/EQF references, which will require further work with involved national authorities in the coming years. The main bottleneck identified (in all qualification documents yet to be referenced), is the diversity of education modalities and sub-systems in the country.

To summarise, when it comes to countries, where EQF is yet to be fully referenced in the HE qualification documents, lack of experience in developing qualifications for the levels of PhD or postgraduate studies has been indicated. A distinct driver – autonomy of awarding bodies – can be seen in Ireland, while in Portugal the complexity of HE can be attributed as a driver influencing the current status of qualification documents.

#### Referencing to EQF levels on the vocational education qualification documents

Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden have referenced NQF/EQF in respective VET qualification documents. Such references often precede the 2017 EQF Recommendation. For example, in Ireland, Europass Certificate Supplements in VET were introduced in 2013. In Lithuania, references to EQF were established as early as 2012. In Poland, as a result of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, references to EQF have been added alongside references to NQF, which were present in most qualification documents since 2015. In Finland, a revision in VET qualification documents was done in 2017, together with all other qualification documents, and certificates may also be provided for completed qualification units upon request. Despite a rather slow adoption of NQF, VET in Finland has had vocational competence-based qualifications, dating back to the mid-1990s with the extension of learning outcomes-based vocational qualifications in the late 1990s. Since the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the Finnish NQF had an extension, which included qualifications from the administrative fields of the Ministry of Defence (2020), and the Ministry of Interior (2022). This addition includes qualifications in the fields of defence administration, prison and probation services, police services, fire and rescue, emergency response centre operations in both VET and HE. However, interviewed national stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), stated that due to the large area of competences, some variation in referencing NQF and EQF in qualification documents still remains.

Planned improvements in Romania and Portugal signal somewhat beneficial trends for the future. Many changes in legislation have been recently introduced in **Portugal**. In February 2022, the models for diplomas and certificates in the field of education and training for adults were defined. Another procedure was put in place for the recognition, validation, and certification of school and professional competences in January 2022, covering the full range of qualification levels 1-5. Two additional areas have been legislated by recent instruments (specialised technical courses and apprenticeship courses); however, these legislative instruments do not explicitly include a requirement to report the levels of NQF/EQF in qualification documentation. The first includes specialised technical courses (May and August 2022), the second being a legislative instrument (February 2022), which presented the full rules and regulations for apprenticeship courses. In **Romania**, progress has been made as a Governmental Decision was issued in 2018 to complete the provision of a Governmental Decision made in 2013 regarding the approval of the NQF and references to NQF in all qualification documents. However, the decision was not enough to create a common practice in all NQF levels. While initial VET qualification documents provide a clear reference to NQF/EQF level, continuing VET remains to be developed. Due to its complexity, no evidence has been found regarding a clear reference to NQF/EQF level on the qualification documents issued for the graduates of CVET. However, according to the Romania's representatives, discussions are ongoing, and a ministerial order is to be approved in the next period of time.

To sum up, one of the main drivers which led to the fact that EQF is fully referenced in five out of seven countries in VET qualification documents is the introduction of Europass Certificate Supplements, and the early use of NQF as one of the main instruments in VET. Lack of legislation and coherence could be attributed to the countries, where certain improvements were identified.

#### Influence of 2017 EQF Provision MS5

Regarding the influence of 2017 EQF provision MS5 in ensuring that qualification documents and/or registers include a reference to EQF, four out of seven countries

performed certain revisions. In **Lithuania**, the Recommendation was used by the responsible institutions as a guidance – mediator to review the information published on the website AIKOS and update it. No significant structural changes were made, as most of the information was already published prior to 2017. In **Finland**, the Ministry of Education and Culture revised the guidelines for Diploma Supplements in August 2017, to include information on how to indicate NQF and EQF levels in Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral degrees and VET Certificate Supplements. Furthermore, basic education and general upper secondary education certificates were revised the same way. In **Poland**, because of the 2017 EQF Recommendation additional information about EQF level on the diplomas was provided, whereas, previously, only NQF level was visible. In **Portugal**, one specific element that was included, is a clear indication to the NQF/EQF levels in all documents used in the database.

Therefore, it can be stated that:

- Direct influence can be seen in **Lithuania, Finland, Poland, and Portugal**, where certain revisions of qualification documents and/or qualification registers and databases were done to ensure that NQF and EQF is properly referenced.
- Indirect influence can be indicated in **Ireland**, where a cost-benefit analysis (for the general education qualification documents), was conducted, in part influenced by the EQF.
- The influence of 2017 EQF provision MS5 is not as clear in **Sweden and Romania**. In Sweden, the development of NQF is only taking place and could be attributed to national developments, while the engagement with the 2017 EQF Recommendation is considered as the next step. In Romania, a Governmental Decree to progress on the NQF development was issued, and a new law on education is being discussed, however, no links due to 2017 EQF Recommendation were identified during the consultations.

### Availability of referencing results and effectiveness of databases and registers

This section aims to answer the question ‘to what extent have provision MS6a and MS6b been implemented?’, which calls to ensure that results of the referencing process is publicly available and in line with the data fields laid out in Annex VI. In addition, this section aims to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of provision MS6a and MS6b, including the effectiveness of information in national qualifications registers and databases reaching and informing stakeholders. Further improvements in the presentation of information and data fields are identified in terms of national databases. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017, and developments since then are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the gathered evidence suggests that provision MS6a and MS6b have been implemented to a large extent as 17 EU-27 MS and four non-EU countries transfer qualifications information to Europass in line with Annex VI. In the context of the case study countries, the use of required fields of Annex VI in the national qualifications databases is met to a large extent with some shortcomings noticed in the description of qualifications and optional fields. In assessing the effectiveness of qualification information in informing and reaching stakeholders, only Ireland offered statistics of the use of the data, while Lithuania and Romania do not perform any evaluations as such. Based on the countries analysed in this case study, the information published on respective registers and databases and, more broadly, NQF in general, is more known to the narrower education community, rather than the general public. Benefits of informing stakeholders and information from NQF, as such, include support in curricula planning and development of other educational processes (Finland), visibility of quality assurance requirements (Ireland,

Lithuania, Romania), information provision to credential evaluators (Lithuania). Due to relatively new development of transferring qualifications data to Europass, the impact of it in reaching different stakeholders is yet to be understood. Obstacles need to be addressed and further improvements made in ensuring the effectiveness of information in the countries analysed. This includes the scope of information published, presentation of data, user focus and further recognition of NQF, lack of interconnectedness, and other existing national databases and educational platforms (such as Qualifax in Ireland). In the light of national database developments, the direct link to the 2017 EQF Recommendation is hard to identify, however certain data revisions in terms of data fields according to Annex VI published were performed.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Provisions MS6a and MS6b put an emphasis on two aspects: 1) making the results of referencing process publicly available at national and Union level, 2) ensuring that information on qualifications is in line with data fields published in Annex VI. In relation to these two aspects, Table 25 below provides an overview of the situation in 2017 and the developments since then among EU-27 MS and non-EU countries.

**Table 25. Overview of the situation in 2017 and the developments since then among EU-27 MS and non-EU countries**

	Situation in 2017	Developments after 2017
Results of referencing (reports) publicly available	In 22 (76%) EU-27 and in five (45%) non-EU countries, results were publicly available.	Three more EU-27 (43% of remaining) countries and five (83% of remaining) non-EU countries made referencing results publicly available
Transparency of information and use of Annex VI – Connection of national databases/registers with the QDR and publication of qualifications in Europass	Prior to 2020, the LOQ (learning opportunity and qualification) portal was connecting national databases of qualifications at EU level. A common online platform – Europass was launched in July 2020, which includes all relevant information about Europass, as well as on the EQF and information on qualifications. The Qualification Dataset Register (QDR) is used as an interface. With this, LOQ was discontinued.	17 EU-27 (59%) MS and four (36%) non-EU (Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey) countries, for which information is available on the Beta version of the Europass website.

Source: authors, based on EQF AG notes (2017-2022) on national developments and information published on <https://europa.eu/europass/en/eqf-referencing-reports> and <https://europa.eu/europass/en/find-courses>

Based on the desk research, most of the EU-27 countries made their referencing results available before the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted. Results are not publicly available for two EU-27 MS (Bulgaria, Sweden). Two further MS (Spain and Belgium [de]), have not referenced their NQF to EQF and, thus, do not have a report to publish yet. Out of non-EU countries, only Bosnia and Herzegovina remains to reference its NQF to EQF. At the Union level, referencing reports are published on a dedicated page of the Europass website<sup>429</sup>. The status of referencing reports is further discussed in the Final report of the study, whilst the focus of this case study is placed on the use of Annex VI.

The development of national qualification databases and registers preceded the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as some countries started developing such databases together with the development of NQFs. Although there is no recent list which would clearly indicate which countries have a qualifications database developed and which do not, certain conclusions can be made by using connection to QDR as a proxy indicator. Based on the connection with QDR and the 2020 European inventory of NQFs, only Belgium [de] and Italy can be

<sup>429</sup> European Union (n.d.). EQF Referencing Reports. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/eqf-referencing-reports>

identified as EU-27 MS, which do not have a qualifications database, and Lichtenstein as a non-EU country. In Italy<sup>430</sup>, no such NQF register was available in 2020, however an IT platform for referencing qualifications to EQF/NQF has been under development in accordance with Annex VI data fields. In Liechtenstein, a website on NQF is available, including information on diploma supplements for VET but no fully fledged database has been developed. While Belgium [de], Spain, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have not referenced their NQF to EQF yet, certain national web portals or databases in Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina exist.

On a European-level, data from national qualification registers were shared with the Learning Opportunities and Qualifications (LOQ) Portal, which was the successor of the initially created EQF Portal. To acknowledge the importance of this work, the 2017 EQF Recommendation provided clearer guidance on the way the information of qualifications may be publicly presented on both national- and Union-level, by defining data fields in Annex VI. The European Commission and its agencies, such as Cedefop and ETF, offer specific guidance to EQF countries on the presentation of EQF levels on qualifications and databases. For instance, thematic webinars were organised for EQF countries with conceptual and technical information on the publication of qualifications in online databases. The European Commission also offered direct financial support for National Coordination Points (NCP), to establish such databases. A PLA on this subject was hosted in March 2019 in Budapest.

At the Union-level, information on qualifications is published on the Europass platform, a common online platform launched in July 2020. The Commission has developed the Qualification Dataset Register (QDR), which is the place where Member States, and other EQF countries, submit their qualifications data based on an agreed data scheme that reflects Annex VI of the EQF Recommendation. A dedicated subpage of Europass is under development and is published as a Beta version<sup>431</sup>, where lists of national qualifications are available. There are 17 EU-27 MS and four non-EU countries for which information is available on the Beta version of the website. The Beta version of the dedicated subpage includes a search by keyword, place, level in EQF, and thematic area. The Europass platform also allows making comparisons between levels across different NQF. Europass also has the ambition to serve as a repository of qualifications and learning opportunities at European-level.

An EQF-Europass project group, started in 2021, was tasked to prepare guidelines on how to draft short descriptions of learning outcomes of qualifications for publication on databases/registers. Additional tasks, such as a revision of the 'profile of skills and competencies' section in the certificate supplement, have been foreseen. A thorough analysis was carried for the preparation of the project group<sup>432</sup>: it was indicated that 26 countries include learning outcomes descriptions in their databases, and nine contain short descriptions. In addition, eight countries use 'the profile of skills and competences' of the Europass certificate supplements. The project group compiled 33 national examples of short descriptions<sup>433</sup>, indicating its relevance while challenges in drafting descriptions outside formal education were indicated. The working group agreed on a framework allowing for a systemic analysis of the different national approaches and analysed 18 selected national examples based on it. Common principles and guidelines will be developed based on the analysis. Initial observations on the improvements include the need to clarify the objectives of the descriptions, distinguish between skills and competences,

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<sup>430</sup> Based on the European inventory of NQFs 2020: IT, LI, BE(de), ES, BA, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>

<sup>431</sup> European Union (n.d.). Find a Course. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/find-courses>

<sup>432</sup> Project group on short descriptions of learning outcomes. Introductory meeting, 13 October 2021.

<sup>433</sup> Based on EQF AG 59 note on relevant developments

tasks and activities, as well as look into the length of a description which does not always indicate its clarity.

Before introducing the strengths and weaknesses of the information on qualifications, presented in national databases and registers, it is essential to briefly present an overview of the status and development of databases and registers, in the context of case study countries. Ten different qualification databases/registers can be identified in seven case study countries, most established prior to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, often, on a basis of other existing educational registers and databases. More precisely:

- Prior to 2017, qualifications databases were already available in: one database in each country – **Lithuania, Poland, Finland**; two databases in **Portugal**; three databases in **Romania**. In Lithuania, the national register of study and training programmes was established back in 2010, and reorganised into a register of studies, training programmes, and qualifications in 2015. In Finland it was decided not to build a separate database for the NQF. The national database for the framework is 'Studyinfo'. The history of the service dates back to a national development process from 2011 to 2015. The database offers information about all levels and all types of education offered in Finland and is open for the general public and professionals alike. Furthermore, it may be stated that in Finland the role of the NQF is primarily a referencing tool, and qualifications in different levels of the educational system have been governed by the respective acts in the legislation, each indicating the qualifications available in that sector.
- In **Ireland**, IRQ was established in 2020 offering a definitive list of qualifications recognised on the NFQ and linked to the European Qualification Dataset Register.
- In **Sweden**, The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (MYH) has been developing a qualifications database for several years. In September 2022, the Swedish NQF entered a new phase, and it is presently working on the further development of a qualification database. It is also linked to the QDR.

## Assessment

In the following section, an assessment on the availability of the results of the referencing process in terms of reports, as well as databases and registers are provided. In addition, a detailed overview of data fields, based on Annex VI, is provided in the context of case study countries. The section also includes an overview of the effectiveness of national qualifications registers or databases and their interconnection at European-level (through the Europass platform), in reaching and informing stakeholders. At the end of the section, obstacles and improvements needed in the presentation of the qualification information are discussed.

### Availability of the results of the referencing process – databases and registers

Notably, the scope of qualifications databases and registers are closely connected to the developments of NQFs themselves. For example, in **Lithuania**, the register includes both VET and HE qualifications. The data in the register itself is updated when a new qualification is added, or something changes within existing ones. For example, 600 qualifications (levels II-VIII, VET and HE), were entered into the register in 2020-2022 and 456 outdated qualifications were eliminated in 2022. However, it still lacks general education qualifications, as those are not yet developed. In **Poland**, the information for HE qualifications is narrower than in other levels of education, and additional information can be found on the websites of each HE institution. After 2017, additional steps have been taken to provide information about these qualifications according to data fields presented in Annex VI. In **Finland**, the database offers information about all levels and all types of education in Finland and is open to the general public and professionals. However, no

qualifications are linked to EQF level 1, due to the approach that basic education certificates and syllabus are referenced to level 2. After the 2017 EQF Recommendation and the extension of the NQF, qualifications have been added to levels 3 and 4.

In cases of recently developed or developing databases, as in **Sweden**, 2,400 non-formal VET degrees are expected to be referenced to SeQF and, therefore, included in the database. The 47 (out of the expected 2400) qualifications that so far have been included are non-formal qualifications. The future procedure for continuous quality assurance of those already included is under development. In **Ireland**, the current register replaced a previous searchable database, which included qualification documents. Compiled in cooperation with awarding bodies, the register lists qualifications at all 10 levels of the NFQ. In mid-2022 the IRQ listed around 10,655 qualifications, 302 providers, and 13,578 courses, an increase of 1,649 courses since 2021.

In Portugal and Romania, there are complexities in the number of, and the information presented in, available databases and registers. In **Portugal**, the national qualifications catalogue (*Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações*) was established with the 2007 VET reform, as a tool for non-higher national qualifications, and as a central reference tool for VET provision, with detailed learning outcomes descriptions and clearly linked to EQF/NQF levels. The national qualifications catalogue includes more than 300 qualifications from 45 education and training areas at levels 2, 4, and 5, and is mainly in line with the required data fields of Annex VI. For HE qualifications, a separate database is in place, which includes information on the institution, type of education, area, and course of study, however information presented in this database is not in line with Annex VI and EQF levels are not mentioned in this database. In **Romania**, there are three registers of qualifications (HE, post-university programmes, VET). However, a project<sup>434</sup> to develop the National Register for Qualifications (RNC) has been in place since 2018, and aims to merge HE and VET databases and registers to create one unique register for levels 3 to 8. The register is due to be operational in June 2023.

Additional future developments can be identified in the following countries, directly or indirectly, related to the national qualification databases and registers. In **Sweden**, Swedish Public Employment Services (SPES) is developing a database on the competences (planning phase), but there has not been a clear match to NQF in the planning phases of such a database. Since 2017, there has been a focus on the further development of the NQF for individual use, and perhaps less focus on the formal qualifications. A four-year project on quality enhancement in strategic development of sectorial validation in the VET sector, called BOSS<sup>435</sup>, has been running, which produced supportive material for the non-formal VET sector. In **Ireland**, the national register will include qualifications from other awarding bodies, when they are eligible to have qualifications included within the Irish NQF, for example, professional, international awarding bodies (e.g. from the United Kingdom)<sup>436</sup>. Longer term, it is hoped that the register will act as an archive of qualifications to assist with recognition activities. There is a plan to include learning outcomes and programme validation reports across all listings too.

Although most of the databases analysed in this case study have been present for many years, qualification databases are not static and are constantly updated to reflect new or updated qualifications and respective developments of the NQFs. The scope of qualification databases often reflects the structure and/or developmental phase of certain NQF levels (missing qualifications due to underdeveloped NQF levels or levels not included in the NQF). More challenges can be seen in countries with more than one qualification database,

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<sup>434</sup> The representatives of the Ministry of Labour and National Qualifications Authority (NQA) mentioned that the project "Databases and registers for qualifications (EQF-NCPs)" – Contract no. VS/2018/0190 is currently run by the NQA.

<sup>435</sup> [ESF-projektet BOSS - Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan \(myh.se\); Kvalitetskompassen \(myh.se\)](#)

<sup>436</sup> QQI (2020). New database of quality-assured education and training qualifications goes live. <https://www.qqi.ie/news/New-database-of-quality-assured-education-and-training-qualifications-goes-live>



often based per level of education, however efforts to integrate and/or merge information can be seen.

#### Use of the data fields in line with Annex VI, 2017 EQF Recommendation

An overview of the use of data fields recommended by Annex VI in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, among case study countries, can be seen in

In addition to desk research, this shows that countries have progressed significantly in publishing information on a Union-level, via the QDR as 17 EU-27 MS and four non-EU countries are transferring their data to the dedicated Europass subpage, in line with Annex VI data fields. Out of 10 qualifications databases analysed in this case study, seven meet the required data fields presented in Annex VI to a large extent, and made the results of the referencing process publicly available. Among the required fields, variations can be seen in the way the description of qualifications is provided, which further strengthens the need to provide guidelines on how such descriptions can be prepared and harmonised. Lastly, the provision of the optional data fields depends on each database. Certain fields are provided in none, or almost none, of the databases studied, such as internal quality assurance, source of information, information language, and others.

Table 26. Based on the use of required data fields, countries could be roughly classified into the following categories:

- In line with required data fields to a large extent: **Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Romania** (RNCIS, RNCP), **Portugal** (national qualifications catalogue), **Finland**
- Meets the required fields in a minimal way: In **Ireland, Romania** (RNPP), **Portugal** (HE database)

Certain limitations can be identified in the status of required data fields among case study countries:

- Title of qualification. Provided by all countries, except Romania (RNPP), as the register covers postgraduate programmes – short post-Bachelor or post-Master up-skilling programmes, which are not intended to provide new qualifications but to improve the level of those who already have a qualification. However, the National Qualifications Authority has decided that these programmes must be approved before entering them into the RNPP. In the coming period, such programmes will have an important role to play in the introduction of micro-credentials.
- Field. Provided by all countries, except Lithuania, where qualifications traditionally are linked to ISCO (coded within qualification code). However, fields of education can be retrieved from the education programmes which lead to acquisition of a respective qualification. In Poland, ISCED fields are not available for all qualifications.
- Country/Region (code). Provided by all countries except Lithuania and Romania, where no regional qualifications exist (only national level qualifications).
- EQF level. Provided in all countries, except Romania (RNPP), and Portugal (HE database).

A lot of variation is seen among the descriptions of the qualifications. In line with the Recommendation, countries are invited to provide data fields in either of the two ways: 1) listing a set of knowledge, skills, responsibility, and autonomy; 2) open text field describing what the learner is expected to know. None of the case study country representatives have indicated that a respective database, or register, fully provides information in one of the

ways and is only assessed to meet the requirements to some extent. Certain limitations can be identified:

- In Poland, one third of HE qualifications have a synthetic description of the learning outcomes in the register, full information is available on the webpages of HE institutions. During the consultations, the need of such a field was questioned, as there were no examples of its further use.
- In Finland, Lithuania, and Sweden, open text fields are available for most qualifications, but their structures differ and in some cases the text provided is brief and not explicit.
- In Ireland and Portugal (HE database), no description of the qualification (all elements) is provided.

The status of the provision of qualification descriptions, and more precisely, learning outcomes, is also in line with the efforts to provide guidelines for describing qualifications (such as EQF-Europass working group on short descriptions), and recent studies. A 2020 study on databases<sup>437</sup> showed that learning outcomes are not covered in a systematic manner, reflecting that no agreed structure regarding the presentation of learning outcomes is present. Further insights are also provided by the 2022 Cedefop study,<sup>438</sup> on comparing VET qualifications, where a recommendation to explore further development of a common qualification profile, was made. It is indicated that common qualification profile structure can be based on Europass certificate supplement and data fields listed in the Annex VI. The study authors also indicate that a common way of representing learning outcomes would support an automated analysis and comparison of qualifications.

When it comes to the optional fields indicated in Annex VI, a high-level of variety between the provision of data can be seen (Table 26). It can be noted that information on the credit points or national workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes is provided in almost all cases, as well as the relationship to occupations or occupational fields. Lastly, certain data fields are not provided or provided only to some extent, for example: internal quality assurance processes; source of information; and information language (code). Improvements can also be identified in other optional fields on a case-by-case basis. As an example of good practice, it can be noted that, in **Finland**, further information on the qualification includes general information of the education system and the sector is described to contextualise qualifications. Additional information fields may include language of study, time of teaching, modality of studies (blended, face to face, online), fees, and available scholarships.

In addition to desk research, this shows that countries have progressed significantly in publishing information on a Union-level, via the QDR as 17 EU-27 MS and four non-EU countries are transferring their data to the dedicated Europass subpage, in line with Annex VI data fields. Out of 10 qualifications databases analysed in this case study, seven meet the required data fields presented in Annex VI to a large extent, and made the results of the referencing process publicly available. Among the required fields, variations can be seen in the way the description of qualifications is provided, which further strengthens the need to provide guidelines on how such descriptions can be prepared and harmonised. Lastly, the provision of the optional data fields depends on each database. Certain fields are provided in none, or almost none, of the databases studied, such as internal quality assurance, source of information, information language, and others.

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<sup>437</sup> Auzinger, M. et.al., 2020, Mapping and analysis of national databases and registers of qualifications

<sup>438</sup> Cedefop (2022). Comparing vocational education and training qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 121. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/939766>

**Table 26. The status of the use of data fields indicated in Annex VI, 2017 EQF Recommendation in case study countries**

Data field			Required/ Optional	FI	IE	LT	PL	PT		RO			SE
								CNQ	HE	RNCIS	RNPP	RNCP	
Title of qualification			Required	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N	P	P
Field (*)			Required	P	P	T	T	T	P	P	P	P	P
Country/Region (code)			Required	P	P	N	P	N	T	N	N	N	P
EQF level			Required	P	P	P	P	P	N	P	N	P	P
Description of the qualification (***)	Either	Knowledge	Required	T	N	N	T	P	N	T	T	T	P
		Skills	Required	T	N	N	T	P	N	T	T	T	P
		Responsibility and autonomy	Required	T	N	N	T	P	N	T	T	T	N
	Or	Open text field describing what the learner is expected to know, understand and able to do	Required	T	N	T	T	N	N	T	T	T	T
Awarding body or competent authority (**)			Required	P	P	P	P	N	N	P	P	P	P
Credit points/notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes			Optional	P	P	P		P	N	P	P	P	N
Internal quality assurance processes			Optional	N	N	N		N	N	N	N	N	N
External quality assurance/regulatory body			Optional	N	N	T		N	N	P	N	P	N
Further information on the qualification			Optional	P	T	P		N	N	T	T	T	N
Source of information			Optional	N	T	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Link to relevant supplements			Optional	T	T	T	N	N	N	P	N	T	N
URL of the qualification			Optional	P	T	P		N	N	P	N	T	N
Information language (code)			Optional	N	N	N		N	N	N	N	N	P
Entry requirements			Optional	P	P	T		N	N	N	N	N	N
Expiry date (if relevant)			Optional	-	T	N		N	N	P	N	T	P
Ways to acquire qualification			Optional	P	T	P		P	P	N	N	N	N
Relationship to occupations or occupational fields			Optional	P	N	T		N	N	P	P	P	T

Notes: 'P' means published, 'N' – not published, 'T' – published to some extent, '-' – not relevant, 'NA' – no information. In Romania, there are three registers identified, where 'RNCIS' contains HE qualifications, 'RNPP' – post-university programmes (level 6) and 'RNCP' contains IVET and CVET qualifications. In Portugal, two registers are identified, where 'CNQ' contains non-higher and VET national qualifications at levels 2, 4 and 5, while 'HE' contains higher education qualifications.

(\*) ISCED FoET2013

(\*\*) The minimum required information on the awarding body or the competent authority should facilitate to find information about it, which would include its name, or if applicable the name of the group of awarding bodies or competent authorities, completed with a URL or contact information.

(\*\*\*) This description shall consist of open text fields, with no prescribed use of standard terminology and no obligation for the MS to translate the description into other EU languages.

### The effectiveness of national qualifications registers or databases in reaching and informing stakeholders

More than half of EQF survey (carried out as part of study activities), respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities), agreed or strongly agreed that guidance provided by the 2017 EQF Recommendation Annex VI has contributed to improved information availability and accessibility on qualifications for different target groups (73 of 104 or 71%). When evaluating the effectiveness of national qualification databases in reaching and informing stakeholders as part of this case study, multiple aspects arise.

First of all, only consultations in **Ireland** provided analytics that the respective register has a worldwide audience with over 8,000 users accessing the site from January to August 2022. Interviewees indicated that the register gives a cost-effective global reach, even if it is not yet fully developed. Feedback on the register has been received from far afield, e.g. observations from the authorities in Hong Kong that participated in the comparative analysis on Ireland's NQF<sup>439</sup>. Other countries did not provide any evidence on the use of the databases and registers. For example, **Lithuania's** AIKOS portal, where information on qualifications is publicly available, does not have a monitoring system. The agency managing the portal mentioned that irregular user surveys were previously performed on the AIKOS website, but the respondent rate was rather low and implementing good quality surveys requires additional resources. In **Romania**, the effectiveness of information publicly available on EQF/NQF, and its use or implementation progress, is not a subject of an evaluation. In **Sweden**, as the qualifications database is under development, no information on its effectiveness to reaching out to stakeholders was identified, though clear intentions to be effective for individuals and employers was stated. In **Portugal**, ANQEP (*Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional*), itself, reports that stakeholders find the provided information useful, and, over the years, it has worked to simplify the language used on the database to be more accessible to stakeholders<sup>440</sup>.

During country consultations, it was noted that the information published in respective registers and databases and, more broadly, on NQF in general, is more known to a narrower education and training community, rather than the general public, as described further in each country case. In countries, where information on the effectiveness is somewhat available (for example, collected via desk research on national evaluations or open consultations on governmental portals), the following benefits have been identified:

- In **Finland**, the interviews conducted with the stakeholders, from different levels of the education system, indicated that the framework is a crucial element in curricula planning and updates by providing reference to development and implementation. In addition, the impact of the NQF to the development of educational processes were voiced as setting the required level of education, understanding the starting and goal levels of learners, personal study planning, progression of studies, cumulative learning, assessment of learning, and guidance and counselling to further study, and employment.
- In **Ireland**, the information of NQF helps international providers, e.g. in HE, by giving visibility to quality assurance requirements. It is also planned for the national qualifications register to have more functionality for the purpose of recognition and for issuing student visas arising from the International Education Mark. This will be a quality mark awarded to HE and English language education providers, who have demonstrated that they meet national standards, to ensure a high-quality experience for international students.
- In **Lithuania**, it was noted that the education community is a frequent user of the AIKOS portal, as there are incentives for them to use it and make sure that the information is relevant (for example, HE institutions use it as one of the promotional channels to attract students). It is also used by foreign partners assessing Lithuanian qualifications in a foreign market.
- In **Romania**, The RNCIS is mostly used by HE institutions as part of the quality assurance procedure of approval of new study programmes. The RNCP is mostly used by training providers to build up their training programmes.

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<sup>439</sup> QQI (2021). Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong, Making Connections for You. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/comparing-qualifications-in-ireland-and-hong-kong.pdf>

<sup>440</sup> Based on the written inputs received from ANQEP in response to the case study questions.

Efforts in ensuring that the provision of information of qualifications is attractive and user friendly have been put in in several countries by additional technological developments or dissemination actions. For example, in Poland, recognition of the limits to the usefulness of “dry” information about qualifications has resulted in the development of additional functionalities through applications<sup>441</sup> for different groups of users. Interactive tools using natural language processing and machine learning for supporting levelling, a chatbot, and integration with job-offers are in development, to provide information based on register’s data, which is a relevant trend in register development. The experience gathered through the analysis of search phrases shows that occupation or name of position is often the first approach. Research on the knowledge and use of the register showed that employers have limited awareness and job postings do not indicate qualifications all that often. An ongoing project<sup>442</sup> currently involves the collection of job postings, and testing how these can be matched with qualifications in creating a qualifications-occupations-skills ontology, by mapping ESCO to the national classification of occupations and performing other actions. Because of limited resources these attempts will be limited to selected sectors and developing a proof of concept – to be further developed in the perspective of 2026. Consultations in Portugal also suggest that indication of NQF levels in the advertisement of job offers are increasingly seen and used by stakeholders.

### The interconnection of databases at European level through the Europass platform, and its effectiveness in reaching and informing stakeholders

In relation to the interconnection of databases and registers at European-level, most case study countries transfer their data to the Europass platform, via QDR, except for Finland and Romania,<sup>443</sup> where such connection is being tested or is under development. Due to the relatively new development of such an interconnection, the impact of it in reaching different stakeholders is yet to be understood. Certain concerns were raised during country consultations. For example, in **Ireland**, Europass does not have a very high uptake so it is suspected that the platform is not used as much as it could be. In **Poland**, it was emphasised that constant changes on the Europass portal create a disincentive for uploading the data on a continuous basis, and the tactic is to wait for the data structure to be stable before establishing an automatic link. Similarly in **Lithuania**, interviewees raised concerns about whether the amount of data transferred is actually relevant and will be regularly updated. This draws attention to the responsibility of countries to ensure that the data transferred is up to date. In **Sweden**, interviewed stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), are cautiously optimistic on the importance of Europass. It has been largely seen as a mobility tool, but interviewees also indicated that it could be used as a platform to coordinate different databases. There is general agreement that the presentation of Europass can be improved in a Swedish context, which will happen as the qualification database becomes fully operational and better known.

Similar views are expressed by the interviewed respondents (EQF AG members, NCPs)<sup>444</sup>. There are mixed opinions about the migration from LOQ information to Europass. Some

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<sup>441</sup> For example <https://szkolnictwo.ibe.edu.pl/> , <https://kompas.ibe.edu.pl>

<sup>442</sup> A national project is implemented by the Educational Research Institute (IBE), the second stage of the project ‘Operating and Developing the Integrated Qualifications Register’ is part of the EU Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development. The attempts to build ontology include the creation of links between available resources, e.g. labelling data, mapping ESCO to the national classification of occupations, developing automatic matching mechanism between qualifications and occupations which were also employed and communicated in the ESCO pilot. Related information about the project activities in English: <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en/news/99-newsletter/newsletter1/1090-modern-natural-language-processing-tools>, <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en/news/100-newsletter/newsletter2/1156-esc0-pilot-project-summary-conclusions-perspectives>, <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en/news/106-newsletter/4-2022/1421-stakeholder-involvement-and-usability-engineering-in-app-development-the-case-of-app-for-qualifications-development-support>

<sup>443</sup> According to Cedefop Inventory 2022, National Qualifications Authority, is currently testing connectivity to the Europass platform via API and QDR. During consultations carried out for the preparation of this case study, it was confirmed that the national testing is underway.

<sup>444</sup> Only six out of 21 interviewees offered an opinion and insights on benefits/drawbacks of the migration from LOQ information to Europass.

see it as beneficial, as it brings all the information to one place and has the potential to increase the visibility of qualifications to the general public. Others have concerns about the visibility of the EQF specifically, as it may be difficult to find qualifications on the Europass platform, and people do not associate Europass with the EQF. There are also concerns about the constantly changing systems, which may require continual updating and remodelling of functions. Although the potential of already existing EQF integration into Europass is seen, it may be too early to fully evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of the migration, as it is still a relatively new change.

Based on the EQF PC, 169 (63%) respondents have noticed communication about Europass platform in the last five years<sup>445</sup>. Most of respondents noticing such communication (that can be attributed to a specific stakeholder type), are someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications (40 out of 169), as well as someone using / consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients, etc. (24 out of 169). The open answers showed that respondents visit the Europass portal to find the necessary information about levels of the EQF and qualifications from other countries. When asked what type of additional information would be beneficial to know more of, holders of qualifications, and those using qualifications to assess candidates/learners, indicated three key types of information. These included ways to compare qualifications from EQF countries (89 out of 98), knowing more about EQF itself (84 out of 98), and ways to compare qualifications from non-EQF countries (83 out of 98).

### Obstacles and improvements needed in the presentation of the qualification information

A number of obstacles, unique to each national context, were identified, which hinder the effectiveness of the use of information provided by NQF, and respective databases and registers. In a sense, these areas can also be seen as improvements needed to be made, in order to ensure the effectiveness of reaching relevant stakeholders and for them to be able to use the information provided. Most of the challenges remain unique, however, a few repetitive insights on obstacles and improvements among the case study countries can be noted.

One obstacle and further improvement is the scope of the information in the database and registers. In **Portugal**, the fact that the main database does not include HE limits the overall attempts to present the NQF as a comprehensive framework. In **Finland**, suggestions by stakeholders from different levels of education include an indirect link to the qualification database and refer more to improvements to NQF itself. Such improvements include clearer alignment of vocational teacher training, special purposes teacher, career counsellor, and study counsellor within the NQF. Clearer definition of qualifications in the field of health seemed essential to improve NQF international comparison and transparency. In **Lithuania**, contradicting views have been expressed during the interviews. For example, information on old qualifications issued by institutions, which no longer operate, or qualifications which can no longer be acquired is relevant for validation and recognition, as foreign partners use AIKOS as one source of information. It is noted that these individuals, who acquired such qualifications, are still active in both education and labour markets. In **Ireland**, autonomy of designated awarding bodies at programme level hinders the effectiveness of the register. As such, these bodies are invited to do a full upload of all qualifications at least once a year, but can do so as frequently as they like. Technological challenges are involved too. Information is not editable, and, instead, it requires a full upload which replaces the previous year's upload.

The presentation of data, user focus and recognition of NQF/EQF are seen as an area for improvement for the databases further described. For example, in **Ireland**, interviews

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<sup>445</sup> N=267. The full set of answers include: NQF (182 respondents, 68%); EQF (177, 66%); Europass platform (169, 63%); Developments of new national qualifications (131, 49%); Developments in the content of national qualifications (learning outcomes) (138, 52%); None of the above (15, 6%), Do not know (7, 3%).

indicated that the register needs greater visibility, needs to be used more and needs to have a clearer user focus. Interview comments included that, whilst NFQ/EQF levels are used in everyday conversation, employers have no use for the register. A somewhat different example is from **Lithuania**, where terms such as “Bachelor” and “Master” are more comprehensible for the wider society in comparison to qualification levels. In terms of AIKOS, it is likely that information on education and training programmes as well as institutions that offer them is easier to navigate and understand than the list of qualifications itself. In **Romania**, none of the three registers are in an appropriate online format and the existing search buttons are not functional, meaning that the registers are presented similarly to an Excel database with no search functionality.

The number of, and a lack of, interconnectedness between the many educational registers and databases and internet platforms somewhat limits the effectiveness of qualification information. For example, in **Sweden**, there are many databases planned or in place<sup>446</sup> that contain information on qualifications for individuals. While these are not currently foreseen to be linked, the Public Employment Agency has expectations on how to get them to interact, and thus start to get a better use of the NQF. Such practical implementation is challenging due to the fact that not all databases have learning outcomes defined in knowledge, skills, and competences. In **Ireland**, there is another more often used database for learners (Qualifax).

In **Lithuania**, interviewees noted that the initial vision for AIKOS was to serve as a portal which provides information, allows for individual career consultations, and further orientation. Certain pre-planned functionalities were discussed, but not implemented, such as the ability to set up an individual account, with the most relevant learning opportunities and use it to access further consultations. As per the OECD Skills strategy<sup>447</sup>, there are several online portals (AIKOS being only one of them), where information is provided but is often fragmented or lacking (available funding opportunities, course qualities, labour market trends). Lithuania would benefit from a centralised portal, a ‘one-stop shop’ online information platform on learning opportunities and benefits, which would be essential to consolidate fragmented information and increase its quality.

Other obstacles and related improvements can be identified:

- Requirements for the inclusion of qualifications in the registers and databases. In **Poland**, both social partners and government representatives indicated that the requirements for including a qualification in the register were limiting the use of the NQF. Some social partners indicated that the burden linked with technical aspects of education and formalised procedures was not justified (e.g. by the need to assure quality, define quite detailed learning outcomes, verification criteria, requirements for methods and organisation of assessment, and assessment execution by using matrices of certification institutions). This has been described in the literature as a clash of “market logic” with “logic of verification” and “bureaucratic logic”<sup>448</sup>. In **Ireland**, widening of the data fields would increase the burden on designated awarding bodies.
- The balance between formal and non-formal education. In **Sweden**, most representatives highlighted the specific Swedish focus on the inclusion of non-formal education that reflects the Swedish labour market model. The representatives from

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<sup>446</sup> [Qualifications database](#), competences database under development by the Public Employment Services, information databases such as [antagning.se](#) and [studera.nu](#)

<sup>447</sup> OECD. (2021). OECD Skills Strategy Lithuania: Assessment and Recommendations, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/14deb008-en>

<sup>448</sup> Stęchły, W. (2021) Edukacja formalna wobec edukacji pozaformalnej i uczenia się nieformalnego. Analiza komplementarności instytucjonalnej w kontekście Zintegrowanego Systemu Kwalifikacji. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych. Available at: <https://depot.ceon.pl/handle/123456789/20843>.

those VET employers that provide non-formal education have high expectations for the inclusion of their non-formal degrees in the SeQF. However, they are critical of the lack of information on EQF, and related recommendations from some of the government agencies that are responsible for formal education at the different levels of education. In Finland, providers of popular education (liberal adult education) criticised the emphasis on formal education as a conservative approach, constituting an obstacle for mobility in the system.

- Cooperation between responsible bodies and stakeholder involvement. In **Sweden**, many of the interviewed stakeholders from different levels of the NQF express a wish for closer cooperation, to fully utilise the potential that NQF and EQF provide for validation and recognition for the labour market. In **Lithuania**, organisational challenges in maintaining the register and its data published on AIKOS can be identified. According to the interviewees, at least three different institutions are involved and some inefficiencies in cooperation were highlighted, such as proactivity to maintain the newest, most relevant information on AIKOS. Also, challenges related to decision-making on the visualisation and attractiveness of information were mentioned. Lastly, more proactivity in developing qualification standards and respective programmes is welcome from the side of employers, who should transfer their needs more actively on, for example, demand for certain specialists, programmes and qualifications, or updates in existing ones. The actual underlying reasons for the inactivity remain to be questioned, it may originate from the lack of culture on social dialogue between governance, authorities, and employers.

### Influence of 2017 EQF Provisions MS6a and MS6b

Regarding the influence of Recommendation 2017 Annex VI in ensuring the availability and accessibility of information on qualifications in reaching and informing stakeholders, it can be stated that:

- Based on consultations, the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, Annex VI is not as clear, or cannot be attributed as, having a direct, causal link in **Poland**. Small data revisions by using Annex VI were implemented in **Finland** and **Portugal** (adding NQF and EQF levels to the databases), and **Lithuania**.
- An indirect link can be identified in **Ireland**, where interviewees noted that, whilst the EQF gave a push to introduce the register in 2020, Europass had maybe had a stronger influence on registers than the EQF, including in Ireland.
- In **Sweden**, the link between NQF, EQF, and the 2017 EQF Recommendation is not very clear to all stakeholders as it has not been well-known outside the relatively small group that have been engaged in the different sectors. The focus has been on getting the SeQF fully operational and the recommendations have not been promoted, or well-explained, to stakeholders. Thus, there is no recommendation to change them at this point in time, as the adopted one still has to be further developed and introduced.

### Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study dealt with the question to what extent MS took measures to ensure that all newly issued qualification documents and/or register of qualifications contain a clear reference to EQF level (provision MS5), and made the results of referencing process publicly available at national- and Union-levels, using data fields in accordance with Annex VI (provision MS6a and MS6b). In addition, it explored the strengths and weaknesses related to both provisions and, especially, the effectiveness of national databases and registers in reaching and informing stakeholders.



Altogether, the case study shows that provision MS5 was implemented to a large extent as a significant number of EU-27 and non-EU countries have started referencing the EQF in their qualification documents and/or qualifications registers and databases since 2017. Only a small number of countries need to start progressing in this direction mainly because of not having referenced their respective NQF to EQF. In the majority of EU-27 and non-EU, countries referencing results are publicly available. It also shows that provision MS6a and MS6b were implemented to large extent, as 17 EU-27 and four non-EU countries transfer qualification information to Europass, in line with Annex VI. In the context of the case study countries, the use of required fields of Annex VI is met to a large extent. Some benefits of informing stakeholders and information from NQF as such include support in curricula planning and development of other educational processes, visibility to quality assurance requirements, information for credential evaluators. Due to the relatively new development of transferring qualification data to Europass, the impact of it in reaching different stakeholders is yet to be understood. In addition, there is a need for a stable national data model before investing in connecting databases with Europass.

While there is a lot of progress towards ensuring that EQF is used in qualification documents and registers, and the information published is in line with the required fields, there is still room for improvement. In the context of the case study, certain developments are needed to ensure that general education qualification documents include references to EQF, as well as Doctoral degree diplomas or supplements. This situation is mainly attributed to the lack of development in respective level of qualification in NQFs. In VET, many of the case study countries referenced the EQF in qualification documents before the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In assessing the effectiveness of qualification information in informing and reaching stakeholders, only Ireland offered statistics on the use of the data. Meanwhile, Lithuania and Romania do not perform any evaluations on this. The information published on respective registers and databases and, more broadly, NQF in general, is more known to a narrower education community, rather than the general public.

Finally, while the study does see links between the further development of databases and registers and the EQF, a direct impact can be attributed in four out of the seven countries included in this case study, where a revision of qualification documents and/or databases was done in order to include references to the EQF. When it comes to the use of Annex VI, mandatory fields are used and implemented to a large extent. The direct link of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is harder to identify. However, certain data revisions in terms of data fields according to Annex VI published were performed.

In terms of future oriented perspectives, the country case studies indicate the need for further guidance and development. In particular, this relates to the description of qualifications and harmonising learning outcomes within them, and the development of certain optional fields. The case study signifies the need to further improve registers and databases in terms of the scope of information on qualifications gathered, and the interconnectedness with already existing educational databases and platforms, as well as the presentation of data, and user focus. As the quality and amount of data grows, a potential is seen in further exploring the link between qualifications, occupations, and skills, by the use of machine learning and artificial intelligence and other emerging digital tools which can further enrich the knowledge and use of NQFs and EQF. For example, the ESCO linking tool pilot could be used to achieve that.

## Case study topic 7: Communication, outreach and encouraging use of the EQF

This case study analyses to what extent the use of the EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies, and public authorities

has been encouraged, and how this has improved since 2017.<sup>449</sup> In order to encourage the use of the EQF, communication and outreach activities, initiated by individual Member States, play an essential role. Therefore, this case study will dive deeper into how countries communicated and encouraged the use of EQF, for instance, by including EQF levels of qualifications, in national databases or registers.

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, survey, and PC results, as well as the report from the 2022 PLA on communication. Seven supporting country case studies have been conducted in Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Romania, Ireland, Slovenia, and Serbia.<sup>450</sup> In total, 57 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic. In addition, 24 persons were consulted during group interviews in the Netherlands and Serbia.<sup>451</sup> Among 81 stakeholders consulted eight represent public authorities, 23 – authorities working with qualifications, 30 – education and training providers, 17 – end beneficiaries, and the remaining three – other EQF stakeholders (individual expert, joint secretariat for the education programs in the field of construction and civil engineering representative, and representative of organisation bridging the gap between labour market needs and education).

The seven countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of well-fare state, the type of skills-formation system, the development of stage of the NQF, and whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review.<sup>452</sup> More specifically on this topic, Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Slovenia have more mature frameworks. Therefore, we expect more and different communication activities in these countries than in Romania and Serbia where the NQFs are less mature or referenced to EQF at a later stage. Furthermore, six of the selected countries have EQF levels on qualification documents (only Serbia does not), and the Netherlands and Romania did so after 2017. Concerning EQF levels used in databases, Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Slovenia already had this in place before 2017, while Ireland, Romania, and Serbia completed this after 2017.

### Availability and accessibility of information on qualifications

This section aims to answer the question ‘how effective the indication of EQF and NQF levels on qualifications, on supplements, and in registers or databases has been in increasing transparency for different target groups.’ In order to assess transparency, the study looks at the availability and accessibility of information of qualifications. After all, if the availability and accessibility of information increases, transparency regarding EQF increases as well.

Regarding target groups, we differentiate between, firstly, NQF developers and implementers involved in the development of qualifications/qualifications system and NQF implementation: public administration, sectoral councils, employers’ organisations, trade unions, sectoral organisations, education and training providers, and education & research institutions. And, secondly, system’s beneficiaries and end beneficiaries. These include learners/students at all levels, people entering the labour market, career advisors,

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<sup>449</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ 4 (4.7a, 4.7b); EQ5 (5.3a) and EQ10 (10.1).

<sup>450</sup> Ireland and Slovenia were not included in the original country selection, but added as relevant information on communication issues was discussed in the country case study reports.

<sup>451</sup> See more details on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview of the type of organisations consulted.

<sup>452</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.

employers and recruiters, HR departments, qualification recognition bodies, and (public) employment services.<sup>453</sup>

As overall **conclusion** the gathered evidence suggests that the number of countries that indicate EQF and NQF levels on qualifications, on supplements and in registers or databases has increased significantly. Moreover, these interventions have made the EQF and NQFs more accessible and available. In turn, this increased understanding and transparency of the system. However, even mature NQFs struggle to increase transparency for specific target groups, most notably potential end beneficiaries (e.g. learners, employers).

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Communication on the EQF starts with 1) referencing EQF levels on newly issued qualifications; 2) making reference to EQF in qualification documents and registers; and 3) inclusion of the different NQFs in the Europass comparison tool. Through these measures, the EQF becomes something that is relevant for a wider group of stakeholders to know about. The case study discusses the state of play and developments since 2017 concerning these three topics to set the scene for the assessment.

First of all, an increased number of countries have started to make reference to EQF in their qualification documents. By 2017, 13 countries made reference to EQF in their qualification documents and registers (11 EU and two non-EU). By January 2023, a total of 24 EU and eight non-EU reference to EQF levels on newly issued qualifications. Three EU-27 (Spain, Croatia, the Netherlands) and three non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia), have not yet done so.<sup>454</sup>

Second, a large number of countries have started to include EQF levels in their national registers of qualifications. Before the 2017 EQF Recommendation, 10 EU-27 and one non-EU country referenced EQF in their national register of qualifications. A development of countries can be seen since 2017, as 11 more EU-27 and one non-EU country began referencing to EQF levels in their national registers of qualifications.<sup>455</sup> Improvements remain needed in six EU (Belgium [de], Bulgaria, Spain, Finland, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg), and 10 non-EU countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Lichtenstein, Norway, Serbia, Kosovo).<sup>456</sup>

Third, the Europass comparison tool and the EQF AG notes show that by 2017, 13 countries (12 NQFs in the EU and one outside the EU), included their NQF in the tool, which allows for an easy comparison between different systems. Since 2017, this number has more than doubled to 30 (25 NQFs in the EU and 5 outside the EU). Three EU-27 (Belgium [de], Belgium [fr], Cyprus, Spain), and seven outside the EU (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Lichtenstein, United Kingdom), have not yet done so.<sup>457</sup>

Moreover, since 2017, the availability and accessibility of the aforementioned communication means improved as well. For example, only 26 out of 105 (25%) of the survey respondents, mainly consisting of public authorities, (strongly) disagreed with the statement that the presentation of national information on the content of qualifications changed since 2017. Regarding accessibility, availability, quality, and user-friendliness of

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<sup>453</sup> This differentiation was also used during the PLA on communication: PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

<sup>454</sup> EQF AG notes (2017-2022).

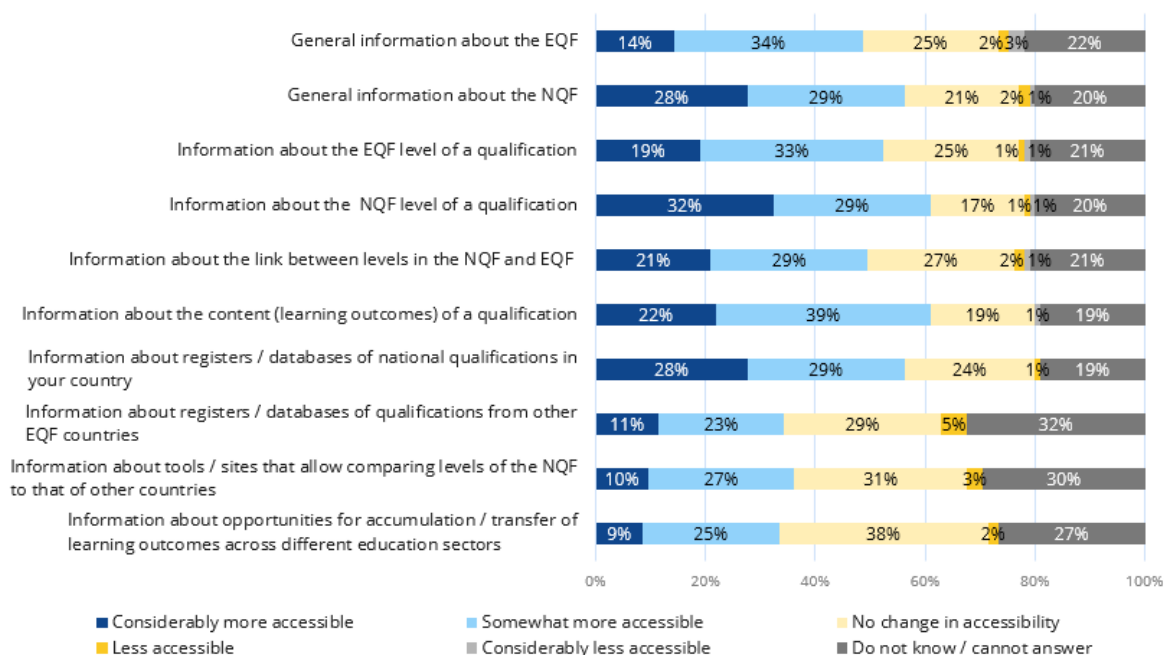
<sup>455</sup> EU-27: EQF AG 45-2, p.3; non-EU: EQF AG 56-2, p.3.

<sup>456</sup> EQF AG 56-2

<sup>457</sup> EQF AG notes (2017-2021. Especially EQF AG 56-2) and Europass website; Europass: Compare national qualifications frameworks across Europe <https://europa.eu/europass/en/compare-qualifications> [accessed 20-02-2023].

information, around half of the 105 survey respondents noticed a beneficial change since 2017. Covering each of the different items presented in Figure 33, around 51 out of 105<sup>458</sup> (49%) respondents selected that information is more accessible. Respondents were least positive about where to find information about opportunities for accumulation, or the transfer of learning outcomes across different education sectors. Only a minor share of respondents think that information is less or considerably less accessible. Respondents mention Europass, national qualifications websites, Cedefop, ETF, and EC websites as sources to find information on EQF levels and qualifications. However, around a fourth of respondents did not know, or could not, evaluate the information and around a fourth did not notice any change in the accessibility of information.

**Figure 33. How do you assess the change in accessibility (availability and quality/ user-friendliness of information) of the following information since 2017**



Note: Total (N)=105.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

## Assessment

Progress has been made regarding the accessibility, availability, quality, and user-friendliness of information on the EQF. However, there is a differentiation in prioritisation of the different target groups. Overall, 'intermediate' groups, such as developers and implementers of the system on one hand, and system beneficiaries and end users on the other hand, (e.g. youth counsellors in schools and national authorities), are prioritised in communication efforts. In general, communication strategies did not have the end beneficiaries, the learners, as their target group. This view is supported by the 2022 PLA survey amongst the 10 participating countries that showed that the following stakeholders were targeted: education and training providers (in 10 out of 10 countries), employers (in 9 out of 10), guidance and counselling practitioners (in 9 out of 10), employment services and

<sup>458</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Information about opportunities for accumulation / transfer of learning outcomes across different education sectors (35 out of 105 or 33%); Information about tools / sites that allow comparing levels of the NQF to that of other countries (38 out of 105 or 36%); Information about registers / databases of qualifications from other EQF countries (36 out of 105 or 34%); Information about registers / databases of national qualifications in your country (59 out of 105 or 56%); Information about the content (learning outcomes) of a qualification (64 out of 105 or 61%); Information about the link between levels in the NQF and EQF (52 out of 105 or 50%); Information about the NQF level of a qualification (64 out of 105 or 61%); Information about the EQF level of a qualification (55 out of 105 or 52%); General information about the NQF (59 out of 105 or 56%); General information about the EQF (51 out of 105 or 49%).

HR departments (in 7 out of 10), general public (in 6 out of 10), public administrations (in 5 out of 10), qualification bodies (in 5 out of 10), learners/students (in 5 out of 10), and workers (in 4 out of 10).<sup>459</sup>

The Europass PC survey results confirm that the EQF is not very well known among end beneficiaries, even if they are familiar with the Europass CV. For those that developed their own Europass CV, only one-third (33%) knew to which level(s) of the EQF their qualification(s) corresponded (N=1531). For those that viewed Europass CVs, more than half (53%) of the respondents knew to which level(s) of the EQF the qualification(s) corresponded (N=389). Seventy percent of the respondents (N=1920) were not aware that they could compare the levels of NQFs across Europe on the Europass platform. Thirty-seven percent of respondents have used the comparison of different NQF levels across Europe on the Europass platform since 2020, once or twice, with the same amount (37%) never making a comparison (N=570).

Even in countries, which are considered to have a more mature NQF, it remains challenging to increase transparency for different target groups. In countries with mature frameworks, the NQF remains rather theoretical with limited direct implications and use for end beneficiaries. The NQFs – and the EQF – and the levels, are not generically used in conversations concerning education and training systems or qualifications. Slowly however, developments are noticeable in the practical use of NQF terminology. For example, in **Denmark**, the NQF levels have been in place for more than a decade and are part of the system. The levels are used in registers and databases. However, as assessed by interviewees (from ministry, QA bodies, education providers, and social partners), in texts, reports, daily conversations, and evaluations it is most common to use the name of training programmes and their level of degrees. The vocabulary is, thus, related to the traditional Danish terminology, rather than the levels of the EQF/NQF. This may change now that non-formal education programmes are being referenced. In the **Netherlands**, EQF levels are currently only indicated on non-formal qualifications included in the NLQF as the legal framework for the formal qualifications is not yet adopted. Therefore, the effect of having a level indication cannot be measured yet. However, some interviewed national stakeholders from the economic sectors indicated that the NLQF is starting to play a larger role, resulting in more non-formal qualifications referencing to the NLQF level (i.e. Defence, metalelectro, health care). In terms of reaching the target groups, the NCP NLQF conducted a number of studies and satisfaction surveys. Impact studies show that the NLQF and EQF are still hardly used in vacancy texts<sup>460</sup>, the NLQF is hardly known under HR professionals, and that the EQF and NLQF are hardly known by companies.<sup>461</sup> The interviews also confirm that there is a small group of people that see the value of the NLQF, but that a majority of companies are hardly aware of the possibilities. On the other hand, education and training providers are more aware of the NQF and its potential. Private providers often know about it, and made a deliberate decision either to apply or not apply. Under VET and HE institutions, knowledge, and interest is increasing, but remains low.

Experiences in Slovenia and Ireland show a more confident perspective. The evaluations of their NQFs show an increased transparency for different target groups.<sup>462</sup> In **Slovenia**, the SQF is positively accepted among users, and users positively evaluate its contribution to the transparency and orderliness of the education system, together with the transparency

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<sup>459</sup> PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

<sup>460</sup> NIDAP (2018), Het gebruik van het NQLF op de arbeidsmarkt Meting 3.

<sup>461</sup> NIDAP Research (2019), B2B NLQF Overzicht Leven Lang Leren markt Nederland Gebruik NLQF/EQF bij bedrijven en instellingen

<sup>462</sup> Coles, M. (2017) National Qualifications Frameworks. Reflections and Trajectories: Dublin: QQI; QQI (2020) The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA; Ermenc, K. S., & Mikulec, B. (2020). Koncept in umestitev učnega izida v slovenski visokošolski prostor.[Learning outcomes and their integration into the Slovenian higher education area]. Journal of Elementary Education, 13 (Spec. Iss.), 105-128.

of qualifications.<sup>463</sup> At the same time, it is perceived that the SQF has contributed to the systematic organisation of the education system in those areas that were not properly developed before its introduction. The evaluation also shows that the SQF is mostly recognised among different users, but only generically. More detailed knowledge of the content, use, and purpose of the SQF are available only to those users who directly use the SQF in their work. From the perspective of using the framework among stakeholders, the evaluation showed that the stakeholders primarily use the SQF to provide information for the needs of their employees and to inform partners and users. The evaluation conducted in Ireland, shows a positive view regarding availability and accessibility of the NQF, as it is shown on virtually all official documents and also referred to when describing the level of education.<sup>464</sup>

## Awareness of the EQF

In the previous section, the case study analysed various activities which communicate the EQF. These include outreach efforts at national levels to various target groups via different communication channels and improved available information on qualifications (e.g. via qualifications registers/databases/Europass comparison tool). This section aims to answer the question 'to what extent the communication activities, their scope and target group have been effective in increasing awareness about the EQF?'

Countries in the 2018 NQF inventory reports state that the approach to communicate the EQF is through communicating the NQF. Hence, communication of the EQF cannot be meaningfully separated from communicating the NQF.<sup>465</sup> By linking the EQF/NQF communication, the meaning and purpose of the EQF is contextualised to the local education systems in a way that stakeholders can relate to. The EQF by itself has no legal value or practical application for end beneficiaries, if not linked to the NQF. Only by being able to relate national qualifications to a national structure, it becomes possible to position the EQF and communicate on it. Besides the actions of individual countries to encourage the use of EQF, the European Commission and European Agencies, such as Cedefop and ETF, launched a number of projects, events, and studies to increase awareness of EQF.

As overall **conclusion**, the gathered evidence suggests that, as most National Qualifications Frameworks are now operational, questions of their dissemination among target groups have increased in importance. Furthermore, as the initial referencing process of NQFs to the EQF is almost complete, acceptance of the importance of EQF and NQF levels increased among key stakeholders. However, in a majority of countries, the broader public is not yet aware of the EQF and NQF and the applicability of the frameworks. This awareness is considered necessary for the EQF to function.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

Among the respondents of the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities), the large majority agreed or strongly agreed that awareness among end beneficiaries on the EQF's purpose (100 of 118 or 85%), on the structure of their NQF (105 of 118 or 89%), and on how to compare national qualification across countries (100 of 118 or 85%) is necessary for EQF to function properly.

The 2018 and 2020 NQF inventory reports show that awareness in EQF countries among stakeholders (mostly NQF developers and implementers ('back office'), and to a lesser

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<sup>463</sup> Ermenc, S. et al., (2020).

<sup>464</sup> QQI (2020) The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA.

<sup>465</sup> NQF Inventory 2018/2020: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>; Also, EQF AG 50-4 provides a summary.

extent system's beneficiaries and end beneficiaries ('front office')), of the existence and added value of the EQF/NQFs is increasing.<sup>466</sup> Around half of respondents (60 of 105 or 57%) to the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities), agreed or strongly agreed with this, and report that national communication efforts since 2017 have increased awareness of the EQF among relevant stakeholders. Slightly less (58 of 105 or 55%) agreed or strongly agreed that national communication campaigns on the NQF always mention the EQF. Forty-two of 105 (40%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that EU communication efforts since 2017 have increased awareness among stakeholders.

## Assessment

Communication of the NQF/EQF can best be linked to communication of other developments and initiatives that are closer to and have a direct application for the user. Furthermore, regarding the channels of communication, it is considered most effective to use existing communication channels, instead of developing new ones. These views are supported by the 2022 PLA and evaluations of the NQFs conducted in Denmark, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Slovenia.<sup>467</sup> Moreover, the main findings of those evaluations indicate that NQF is quite well-known among education institutions and employers, while the general public is less aware. An interesting exception is **Ireland**, where the QQI noted that since 2003 the NFQ 'has become embedded in how we think and speak about qualifications in Ireland.'<sup>468</sup> Amongst the general public, around one in three adults were aware of the NFQ in 2017, whilst 28% were aware of the EQF.<sup>469</sup> In 2019, a survey of recruitment professionals found that 96% were aware of the NFQ and 54% referred to it during recruitment. The corresponding figures for EQF were 69% and 17% respectively – and 53% wanted to know more about the EQF, and 50% more about foreign qualifications recognition.<sup>470</sup> These statistics are strengthened by national stakeholders interviewed (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), reporting that in the FET sector the NFQ 'fan' diagram was at one time 'on every door in every provider'; and that as far as Education Training Boards (ETBs) are concerned, all programme development derives from the NFQ and is consciously done in that way.<sup>471</sup> In contrast, as regards the EQF, providers would need to be very involved in quality to be aware of the EQF – practitioners would have low awareness (as noted, there is a separate 'global fan' showing the NFQ, EQF, and QF-EHEA relationships). At the same time, from a (HE) student perspective, it is questionable how much people understand about what lies beneath the NFQ and the 'level' of their qualification.

Despite various communication efforts, the level of awareness of the EQF among the general public is low, as shown by national experts of Czechia, the Netherlands, and Romania. In Serbia and Denmark, there are no reported significant awareness-raising activities targeting a wider population about the EQF/NQF, and their benefits to individuals, training providers, employers, institutions of higher education, etc. Contrary, there are various activities to create awareness only among the professional public. For instance, in **Denmark**, national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), mention that the use of

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<sup>466</sup> Based on summary provided by EQF AG 50-4. See as well NQF Inventory 2018/2020: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs>

<sup>467</sup> Ireland: Indecon (2017) The 2017 Policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ; QQI (2020) The Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Referencing to the EQF and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the QF of the EHEA; Slovenia: Ermenc, S. et al., (2020); PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

<sup>468</sup> Foreword by QQI in Coles, M. (2017) National Qualifications Frameworks. Reflections and Trajectories. Dublin: QQI

<sup>469</sup> QQI (2017) A Review of Public Awareness of Qualifications Frameworks

<sup>470</sup> QQI (2019) Making Sense of Qualifications – Views from Recruitment Professionals in Ireland <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Qualifications%20interactive.pdf>.

<sup>471</sup> <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>

the NQF is regarded as a technical issue for experts and it has not been targeted for the use by individuals.

In other countries, there are public communication activities being conducted, however, they are not directly leading to higher levels of awareness among target audiences. In **Czechia** for instance, secondary schools and universities are regularly informed about the EQF and the possibilities it brings for international mobility, and hold lectures for employers and organisations that send young people for practical placements abroad. The level of awareness of the national register of qualifications is higher than that of the EQF, but varies greatly across groups.<sup>472</sup> The interviewed national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers), report that, although the EQF is regularly presented to young people at student fairs and other student events, awareness among the general public and among employers is low. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the NCP NLQF has put in a lot of effort to bring across the purpose and functioning of the NLQF, mainly to the community of experts and professionals working on qualifications. The national stakeholders indicate that the interest in NLQF among professionals, but also end beneficiaries, is increasing. This is not so much due to the NLQF, itself, but more because of the changing policy context, emphasising lifelong learning, in which the NLQF gradually plays a more prominent role (e.g. being one of the quality labels for training courses that can be funded through the 2022-introduced individual learning voucher scheme (STAP-budget)).

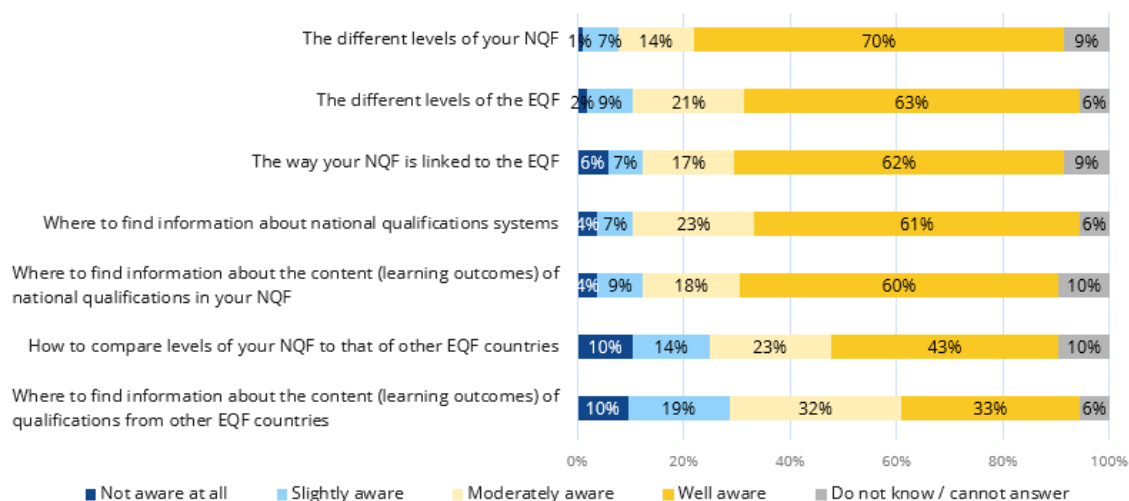
The survey and PC (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), give different results in terms of awareness of different NQF/EQF elements. Both survey and PC respondents are well aware of the different levels of NQF and EQF, the way NQF is linked to EQF, and where to find information about NQF and NQF content. Survey respondents are the least aware of where to find information about the content of qualifications from other EQF countries and, how to compare levels of country NQF to other EQF countries. PC respondents were less aware only about how to compare levels of country NQF to other EQF countries (see figures below for more details). Analysis of these results by different breakdowns show that end beneficiaries or holders of qualifications are usually slightly less aware of all of these NQF/EQF elements. However, it must be noted that the survey and PC were completed by respondents with above average knowledge about, and interest in, NQF/EQF. Hence, these results cannot be considered to represent the whole population. This is also confirmed by the fact that knowledge was found to be lower among holders or users of qualifications responding to the PC that had no professional relation to the NQF (21 of 42 or 50% and 19 of 33 or 58% were well aware respectively, compared to 51 of 60 or 85% of those working with quality or recognition of qualifications). In addition, a large majority of holders of qualification(s) and persons using qualifications to assess candidates/learners/clients, etc., who responded to PC, felt that they would benefit from knowing more about various issues related to NQF/EQF, strengthening this conclusion. More details about their opinion are provided in the figures below.

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<sup>472</sup> As exemplified by the Upskilling Project: <https://www.edu.cz/podpora-skol/projekty-esif/systemove-prostredi-k-prohlubovani-kompetenci-upskilling/>



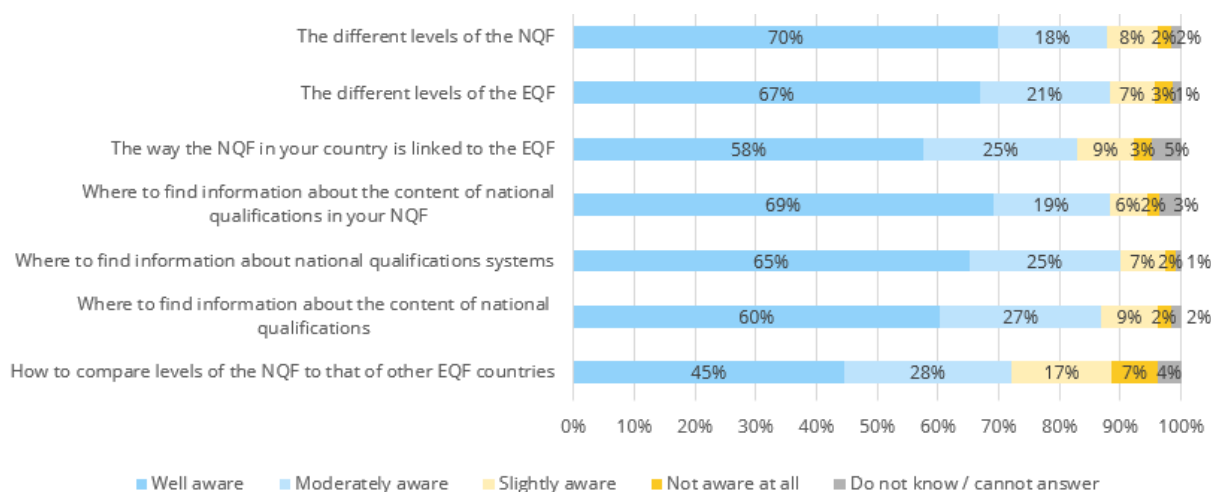
**Figure 34. How would you rate your awareness of the following aspects related to the NQF in your country and the EQF?**



Note: Total (N)=105.

Source: own elaboration based on online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 2022

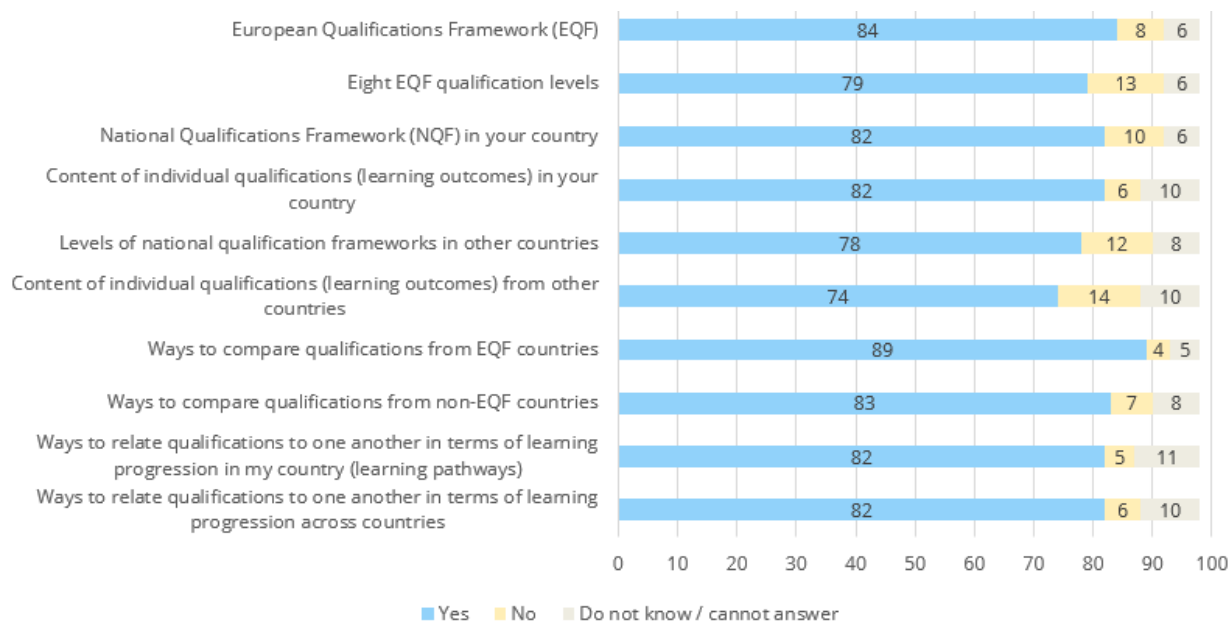
**Figure 35. Please rate how aware are you of the following National Quality Framework (NQF)/European Quality Framework (EQF) aspects**



Note: Total (N)=229.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

**Figure 36. Do you feel that you would benefit from knowing more about the following**



*Note:* Total (N)=98. Question only shown if answer to Q13 is “As a holder of qualification(s) (i.e. learners, graduates, jobseekers, workers, etc.)” or “As someone using qualifications to assess candidates / learners / clients, etc.”.

*Source:* own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

### Encourage use of EQF

This section aims to answer the question ‘to what extent have Member States implemented provision MS7 of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, which encourages “the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities to support the comparison of qualifications, and transparency of the learning outcomes”,<sup>473</sup> and which strengths, weaknesses, and obstacles can be observed?’ To answer these questions, we analyse what type of actions are taken by the Member States and whether the number of countries that undertake actions has increased since the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

As overall **conclusion**, the gathered evidence suggests that the actions to encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies, and public authorities significantly increased since 2017. This is seen as more countries make reference to EQF levels on registers and newly issued qualifications, and have included their NQF in the Europass comparison tool. Although these indirect communication measures have been increased, it seems most effective to communicate about the NQF/EQF in a practical manner, and applied to concrete situations and linked to other labour market or educational activities.

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

There has been significant progress in encouraging the use of EQF since 2017. As already elaborated on under section 2, since 2017, a doubling in countries that included levels on qualifications and registers can be seen, and most countries now have included their NQFs on the Europass Tool.<sup>474</sup>

<sup>473</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).

<sup>474</sup> EQF AG notes (2017-2022).

## Assessment

It is in line with expectations to focus first on technical implementations, such as referencing to EQF, before encouraging and communicating its use to beneficiaries. This view is supported by the 2022 PLA report, where countries indicated that before 2017, the topic of communicating the EQF has not been high on the agenda, as individual countries and the EQF AG prioritised the more technical work.<sup>475</sup> There are some additional examples that shed light on national interventions to communicate the use of EQF to beneficiaries. For example, prior to the PLA on communication in November 2022, a survey was filled out by 10 countries. This survey showed that most of these countries had developed an NQF communication strategy (Austria, Belgium [nl], Belgium [fr], Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Spain), while the rest of the countries responded that communication activities took place without a specific strategy (Finland, Italy, Lithuania). The main channels used for disseminating information on the NQF and EQF were conferences/workshops (in 10 out of 10 countries), qualifications database/register (in 9 out of 10), NQF website (in 9 out of 10), guidelines/manuals (in 7 out of 10), leaflets/posters (in 6 out of 10), networking activities (in 5 out of 10), newsletters (in 5 out of 10), social media (in 4 out of 10), and policy instruments (in 2 out of 10). Below, country illustrations are provided on using some of these different dissemination methods.

Communication activities are most effective if they are focused and targeted to specific stakeholder groups, as mentioned by various national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries). In the **Netherlands**, for instance, what national stakeholders consider most effective, besides general communication means, such as the website and brochures, is to engage people in conversations about the NLQF. This takes place in information sessions, being organised throughout the year and throughout the country. Evidence suggests that, for people that are new to the NLQF and who participate in such an information session, it takes at least half an hour to present the discourse around levelling qualifications, and get them to understand the purpose and functioning of the NLQF. Furthermore, the NCP NLQF found that it most effective to communicate about the NLQF in a practical manner, when the NLQF is applied to concrete situations and practical applications, for instance, as a tool to assure the quality of a course leading to the qualification.<sup>476</sup> Another interesting example of a targeted communication and dissemination strategy can be found in **Romania**, where the University for Civil Engineering in Bucharest introduced in the curricula of some master programmes (e.g. Education Management, Computer-based Didactical technologies), the subject called “National Qualifications Framework”. By this, future teachers are informed about EQF/NQF, its principles and concepts, and get a more appropriate basis for their future activity. In **Czechia**, too, the interviews showed that communication efforts around EQF are most effective when directly connected to smaller ‘sub’ elements of the NQF, such as micro-credentials or individual sectors. For instance, the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, in cooperation with the Union of Industry and Transport, is currently implementing and promoting the ‘Competence 4.0 project’. This project is to identify so-called new and future competencies and create so-called sector pyramids, which will define general and specific competencies for individual sectors. These sectoral pyramids should serve as a basis for the redefinition of secondary school programmes, the updating of the NQF, and educational programs to support retraining.

Despite the variety in efforts, interviewed national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), indicate that it remains challenging to communicate a technical tool such as EQF/NQF. For instance, it is difficult to communicate the added value if the take-up is still low: the

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<sup>475</sup> PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

<sup>476</sup> NB: the NLQF now it is linked as one of the prerequisites for training providers to offer their training course for funding through the recently introduced demand-side individual funding instrument (i.e. STAP-budget).

framework only adds to lifelong learning when a large part of the qualifications (a majority) are included in the framework. This view is supported by interviewees from **Czechia**, who indicate that qualifications, obtained through informal and formal education in NRQ, are not complete, with a number of qualifications are missing, and, therefore, cannot be validated or linked to the EQF. According to the interviewees, it is easier to communicate the use of a complete NQF. Furthermore, the arguments related to international mobility (that the EQF would support international mobility of qualifications), does not seem to work in reality. For example, national stakeholders from the **Netherlands** (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), indicate that there are many other regulations that support or hamper mobility and hence that the NQF/EQF cannot be communicated serving this purpose on its own.

## Conclusions and lessons learned

The case study shows that various EQF/NQF communication activities have been conducted, and the effectiveness in raising awareness has improved since 2017. However, it is challenging to measure to what extent, and which communication activity, is most effective. In particular, the professional public seem to be more aware of the EQF and its use now, compared to before the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This could be because of the significant increase of countries including EQF levels on qualifications, in databases, Europass, and registers. Moreover, as the availability of information about the EQF, NQFs, and the qualifications included improved, the system also became more transparent for potential users.

Although communication efforts around the EQF have improved, there are also further opportunities. Firstly, when communicating the EQF, it seems most effective to link EQF and NQF to each other, and contextualise the meaning and purpose of the EQF to the local education system in a way that stakeholders can relate to it. Secondly, when communicating the EQF, it is crucial to do it in a way that is close to the user and highlights its practical use for the user. Thirdly, to increase the outreach of EQF/NQF, employers could be encouraged to begin using the level in job specifications, job advertisements, applications, vacancies, etc. Employers are recipients of qualifications when they are recruiting people from other industries or other countries. Related to this, it is also important to encourage employers to use the NQF/EQF to value their existing staff's levels of qualifications. By analysing the qualification levels of their existing staff, employers could be supported to adjust their recruitment to the right level, and also to support the lifelong learning of the employees. In such situations, the EQF/NQF can enable employers to communicate their qualification needs more efficiently.<sup>477</sup> Finally, social partners are key stakeholders when it comes to disseminating information on EQF/NQF to employers and employees regarding the value added of transparency and labour market mobility. In some countries social partners have been involved in developing the NQF and its content. However, the role of the social partners varies across countries, and, in some countries, they have not been involved in the development of the NQF.<sup>478</sup>

## Case study topic 8: Third country qualifications and migration

This case study analyses to what extent the EQF and its related activities contributed to the integration of migrants (including increased employability, mobility, and social integration of migrant learners and workers), by gaining a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems, and fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside of the Union, as referred to in provision EC/AG 13 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation on

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<sup>477</sup> As suggested during the PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

<sup>478</sup> As suggested during the PLA on Communication 16-18 November 2022, the Hague, summary report.

procedures for non-EQF third country qualifications<sup>479</sup> which relates to “possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable [...] the comparison of non-EQF third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF”<sup>480</sup>. This study therefore looks at whether understanding of non-EQF<sup>481</sup> qualification frameworks has improved (section 1), to what extent the EQF has facilitated recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications (section 2), and whether this has eased the integration of migrants (section 3).

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey, PC, and workshop results. Five in-depth country reviews are included in this case study: Germany, Spain, Poland, Serbia, and Sweden. In total 44 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic, this includes 13 interviewees, who participated in group discussions on the topic. Among 44 stakeholders consulted five represent public authorities, 12 – authorities working with qualifications, 16 – education and training providers, nine – end beneficiaries, and the remaining two – other EQF stakeholders (National Centre for Climate Change representative and association advising on recognition of qualifications representative).

These five countries represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the development stage of the NQF, whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review, and feature two different skills formation systems (Germany representing the German model skills formation system and the remaining four countries the statist system).

### Understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications and systems

This section brings together the evidence to answer the question ‘to what extent did the EQF and the related activities contribute to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems of non-EQF third countries?’. This section focuses on the development of cross-links between the EQF and other national/regional qualifications frameworks, and the increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications outside of the union, as a result of the EQF and its implemented activities. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017 and developments since then are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests, that to some extent, the EQF and its related activities have contributed to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems of non-EQF third countries. EQF activities promote visibility and international cooperation. Comparisons help to build cross-links between the EQF and non-EQF third country qualifications which, according to interviews with international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives and desk research, improve the understanding of qualification frameworks of the non-EQF third countries taking part in the comparisons. This sentiment was echoed for planned and up-coming comparisons, e.g. which were well perceived as opportunities to build further cross-links and bridge understandings. However, the positive perception of EQF on improving understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications was mostly isolated to representatives of international organisations and ENIC-NARIC representatives, and is perceived as continuous progress, with limited distinction made between before and after 2017. Further, impacts of the EQF on increased understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks was limited in countries, which have less developed NQF. On the other hand, in countries with more

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<sup>479</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ2 (2.2); EQ6 (6.1, 6.2).

<sup>480</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03).

<sup>481</sup> Third countries in this context are non-EQF countries.

developed NQFs, the role of the EQF was more dependent on already established frameworks and practices. For example, in Sweden, national level stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), indicated that the EQF provided support in ENIC-NARIC recognition practices, but in Germany the EQF was deemed less relevant in the context of national legislation.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

The desk research revealed that much of the EQF work, related to improving the understanding of third countries qualifications, took place prior to 2017 (for example, previous comparison pilots with Australia, Hong Kong, and New Zealand). Since then, ongoing and planned EQF activities continue to develop knowledge and understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks and systems. Indeed, interviewed stakeholders (international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives), made little distinction between pre- and post-2017 impact of the EQF on the better understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks and systems, and responses indicated that advancements described are a continuation of previous EQF work, discussed below.

Gathered evidence suggests that following the perceived success of the EQF, RQFs are increasingly being developed in other regions of the world, for example, the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF), the ASEAN countries' qualifications reference framework (AQRF), Caricom, and the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>482</sup> This is supported by interviewed international organisation representatives who expressed that the EQF has catalysed the development of similar NQFs and RQFs globally, and its activities work to further promote the EQF concept, and facilitate engagement in non-EQF third countries. Furthermore, the interviewed stakeholders (international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives), brought up that the EQF is acting as a 'role model' for RQF and NQF growth, becoming a global standard, and facilitating the development and visibility of cross-links between qualification frameworks. As an example,<sup>483</sup> the CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF) was designed with reference to the EQF to enhance comparability across different global education and training systems<sup>484</sup>. In addition, EU support and lessons learnt from the EQF experience also shaped the development of the AQRF<sup>485/486</sup>. Moreover, an ENIC-NARIC representative suggested that some countries are unofficially adopting EQF standards (e.g. learning outcomes), to help facilitate the recognition of their qualifications within the Union (e.g. Lebanon).

EQF activities, namely EQF related projects and comparison pilots, which work to raise awareness and promote the EQF, can help to further improve the understanding between frameworks and systems. Moreover, one ENIC-NARIC stakeholder described how the dissemination of information related to the EQF helps non-EQF third country institutions understand how to meaningfully compare their qualifications to the EQF; another indicated that the increase in commonalities between frameworks has facilitated understandings of

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<sup>482</sup> ETF (2020). Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020.

[https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF\\_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020\\_EN.pdf](https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020_EN.pdf)

<sup>483</sup> Additional examples include the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the SADCQF which used the EQF as a benchmark for referencing and the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), which will cooperate with 55 countries across the continent.

<sup>484</sup> Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat. The CARICOM Qualifications Framework: A model for enabling regional seamless human resource development. <https://caricom.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-CQF-for-Member-States.pdf>

<sup>485</sup> SHARE. 2015. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and National Qualifications Frameworks State of Play Report. <https://www.share-asean.eu/sites/default/files/2017-07-03-QF-study-final-for-SHARE-website.pdf>

<sup>486</sup> ETF (2020). Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020.

[https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF\\_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020\\_EN.pdf](https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020_EN.pdf)

diplomas from non-EQF third countries in recognition work. However, some stakeholder perceptions<sup>487</sup> suggest that end beneficiaries, such as employers, do not benefit as much from EQF activities as, for example, public authorities, who are more exposed to ongoing activities. According to EQF AG notes, the visibility of comparison pilots conducted before 2017 were well perceived as inspiring cooperation with non-EQF third country qualification frameworks.<sup>488</sup> Comparison pilots planned and conducted after 2017<sup>489</sup>, including with Cape Verde, Ukraine, and the SADCQF<sup>490</sup>, provide an opportunity to continue to build understanding and aim to enhance mobility. For example, the Ukrainian comparison pilot aims to make qualification recognition easier (especially considering increased diaspora of Ukrainians due to war<sup>491</sup>). As such, the Ukrainian NQF has been revised and more closely approximated with the EQF, for example, in qualification levels and quality assurance standards.<sup>492</sup>

## Assessment

Interviews with relevant stakeholders, such as public authorities and representatives of international organisations, show that the EQF and its related activities did, to some extent, contribute to a better understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems of non-EQF third countries. For example, EQF projects actively promoting the EQF (e.g. SHARE,<sup>493</sup> MERIC-Net<sup>494</sup> project, and RECO Latin<sup>495</sup>), help to build common principles in frameworks, and bring relevant stakeholders together. In this way, understanding is improved. For example, one ENIC-NARIC stakeholder noted that activities related to the African Continent Qualification Framework (ACQF), including webinars and information sharing, led to an interesting exchange of experiences and lessons learned between relevant EQF and ACQF stakeholders. This shows the crucial role that the visibility of EQF activities can play in information sharing and promoting understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks. The results of the survey<sup>496</sup> support this to some degree. Around half (35 of 61 or 57%) of respondents (mostly public authorities), who were aware of EQF work on comparison pilots agreed that they increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications awarded by non-EQF countries. Moreover, 30 of 61 (49%) of respondents felt that comparison pilots improved national procedures in their country related to the recognition of qualifications and validation of skills of migrants from non-EQF countries. However, it is not possible to assess the full impact of comparison work, as reports have either only recently been completed (Ukraine, February 2023), are still ongoing (Cape Verde, due to be completed in Summer 2023), or have not yet begun (SADCQF, due to begin in Summer 2023). However, findings from the country case studies show a mixed picture on the EQF's contribution to improved understanding of non-EQF third country qualification systems, pointing to some specific limiting factors:

- In **Germany**, stakeholders, which included public authority and education and training representatives, suggested that, while the use of the EQF within the EU is clearly established, in the context of non-EQF third countries, the EQF is less relevant to national procedures of recognition and related legislation (e.g. The Directive 2005/36/EG and 2013/55/EU, together with the Recognition Act

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<sup>487</sup> As indicated interviews with stakeholders from two national level public authorities and an EU level organisation

<sup>488</sup> Pilots comparing third country qualifications frameworks with the EQF have been carried out in 2014-15 and published in 2016-17 with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) and have been seen to improve the transparency of qualifications between Europe and Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. See also: <sup>EQF AG 50, minutes p.2.</sup>

<sup>489</sup> The methodology of recent comparison pilots was devised following the 2017 EQF Recommendation in 2019.

<sup>490</sup> EQF AG 55-4, p. 3.

<sup>491</sup> EQF AG 59-1, p. 12.

<sup>492</sup> ETF. National Qualifications Framework – Ukraine 2021. <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-11/ukraine.pdf>

<sup>493</sup> SHARE is a joint EU and ASEAN programme developed to strengthen regional co-operation in HE; one stakeholder indicated that the promotion of the EQF within such events had helped to overcome resistance to the development of a learning outcome-based framework in the Philippines and increased exposure to the experiences of EU countries and the EQF. See: <https://share-asean.eu/>

<sup>494</sup> See: <https://www.uni-med.net/projects/meric-net/>

<sup>495</sup> See: <https://www.recolatin.eu/conferences/>

<sup>496</sup> Online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 2022.

(*Anerkennungsgesetz*), and the ZAB (*Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen*), Certificate Assessments of the Central Office for Foreign Education), which is not linked to EQF or NQF. Moreover, national stakeholders did not indicate that the EQF has contributed to an improved understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks or systems in this context.

- In **Spain**, due to the ongoing development of the Spanish NQF (MECU), national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), had very little information in response to the evaluation questions, showing that the effect of the EQF, in this regard, is dependent on a functioning national framework in place. However, it was perceived that the EQF would bring valuable knowledge and experience, which would build knowledge of non-EQF third country qualifications framework links and could ease the complexities faced in the recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications.
- In **Serbia**, national stakeholders, including public authority, education and training, and employers' association representatives, were unfamiliar with developments related to EQF and how this impacted recognition processes in Serbia, or, in general, the EQFs impact on the understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications frameworks or systems. While this suggests that the EQF has had limited impact in this area it also points to a lack of awareness of the EQF among relevant stakeholders in Serbia, which has a less advanced NQF.
- In **Sweden**, the EQF was highlighted by national stakeholders (public authority representatives, education and training providers, and industry representatives), to support the work of ENIC-NARIC in recognition of qualifications. In this case, while the EQF can be seen to have impact through the provision of a supporting tool in recognition processes, the specific 2017 EQF Recommendation was not perceived by national stakeholders as having contributed to the development of their understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications frameworks or systems.

In general, there was a noted lack of information gathered at country-level regarding the contributions of the EQF to a better understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications. In **Serbia** and **Sweden**, the EQF was not seen to have impacted on stakeholders' understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications, or they were not exposed to such developments, and as such they had few reflections. In both **Spain** and **Poland**, it was perceived by national stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), to be too early to assess the influence of the EQF and NQF on relations with qualification frameworks outside the EU. However, in Poland, it was noted that a lack of understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications stems from the detachment of the NQFs from the reality of recruiters and migrants or jobseekers. It was suggested that qualification frameworks are either not known or not deemed relevant to this group.

The limited impact of EQF in countries with less developed NQFs is to be expected, as relevant stakeholders have less exposure and familiarity with the EQF. However, this was also the case in other countries included in the case study with more developed NQF (e.g. Sweden), and suggests that stakeholders have different exposure and familiarity with the EQF depending on the context of their work. The gathered evidence suggests that for stakeholders directly involved in recognition processes or working with non-EQF third countries (e.g. ENIC-NARIC and international organisation representatives), the EQF, and its activities, have led to improved understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks. On the other hand, stakeholders working in a national context, such as those interviewed as part of the country case study (including public authorities, education and training providers, and social partners), do not feel the EQF has provided practical support in this regard. Country case studies also revealed that nuances in national contexts, such



as the development stage of NQF, or already established frameworks of recognition of qualifications, can impact on the degree of familiarity with the EQF, and the extent to which the EQF is known or deemed relevant within the national context.

## Integration of migrants and fair recognition of qualifications

This section brings together evidence to answer the question ‘to what extent did the EQF and the related activities contribute to the integration of migrants by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union?’. Therefore, this section focuses on the extent to which the EQF and its related activities have enabled the recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union, and the direct and indirect effects this might have on the integration of migrants. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017, and developments since then, are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests that the EQF has to some extent indirectly contributed to the integration of migrants, by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualification awarded outside of the Union. It was expressed by respondents across all consulted stakeholder types that the principles of the EQF helped to establish a clear and common language across qualification experts and countries, something which the 2017 EQF Recommendation has built upon with improved clarity. Stakeholder perceptions indicated that the EQF supports recognition work undertaken by ENIC-NARIC centres or qualifications agencies, increasing efficiency and as a useful tool for comparison and transparency. Challenges, such as effectively targeting employers and educators who still may not recognise the value of the EQF or trust non-EQF third country qualifications, were highlighted as limiting the impact of the EQF. In countries with less developed NQFs, the EQF played little to no perceived role, but its potential in the future as a tool for recognition was indicated.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

As with the previous section, there is little distinction between pre- and post-2017 developments of the EQFs contribution to the fair recognition of qualifications. There is little gathered evidence, which suggests that the EQF in general has contributed directly to the fair recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications. However, the evidence gathered through desk research and interviews with international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives does suggest some indirect impacts of the EQF, but is reflective of a continuation of the role of EQF in general and is not specific to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. One ENIC-NARIC representative suggested that the provision to increase comparisons between non-EQF third country NQFs and RQFs (Provision EC/AG 13 in the 2017 EQF Recommendation<sup>497</sup>), strengthened the EQFs commitment to increase international cooperation, and perceived that this might have contributed to an increase in applications of recognition from North African countries (e.g. Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). This anecdotal evidence highlights the role of the EQF in facilitating international cooperation and mobility, but this should be considered in the wider context of other factors, such as the mobility partnerships between the EU, Tunisia, and Morocco.

Desk research and stakeholder (international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives), views also support that the integration of migrants is more generally dependant on national level migration and integration policies, as well as economic and market labour forces,<sup>498</sup> which develop in response to national context. For

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<sup>497</sup> Recommendation 13 states: “Explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable, in accordance with international agreements, the comparison of third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF”.

<sup>498</sup> Bohlinger, Sandra (2019). Ten years after: the ‘success story’ of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

example, an ENIC-NARIC representative highlighted that in France the Interministerial Committee for Immigration and Integration (*Comité interministériel à l'immigration et à l'intégration*), of 6 November 2019, introduced measures to facilitate access to diploma recognition to newly arrived migrants to better integrate them into employment, leading to an increase in recognition requests and applications at the French ENIC-NARIC (50% increase between 2020-2021).

## Assessment

Desk research and interviews with international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives reflect that, while the EQF can support recognition procedures, the integration of migrants and fair recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications are more so dependent on specific migration policies of individual countries and already established recognition practices. Requests for recognition of qualifications of migrants are often handled by ENIC-NARIC centres<sup>499</sup>. Interviews with ENIC-NARIC representatives indicated that the EQF greatly supports the recognition of qualifications of EQF countries, and, therefore, indirectly contributes to the easing of the process of labour or education integration. However, it was noted that its use in the case of non-EQF third country qualifications is dependent on the commonalities between non-EQF third country qualification frameworks or systems, and the NQF or EQF. In cases where there are fewer cross links between qualification frameworks and NQF, or EQF, the EQF becomes less integral to the process. In this sense, it is perceived that the EQF has an impact, but only when recognition is facilitated by other means.

Country-level case studies similarly found that to a small extent the EQF and its activities indirectly contribute to migrant integration and recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications, this was expressed most strongly in Sweden.

- In **Sweden**, as previously mentioned, the EQF supports the work of ENIC-NARIC as it is used compare NQF and EQF levels and facilitates recognition in cases where physical documentation is unavailable,<sup>500</sup> actively contributing to easing migrant integration. Through its Qualifications Assessment Tool,<sup>501</sup> the ENIC-NARIC centre at the Swedish Council for Higher Education makes available online printable comparisons between qualification levels from various non-EQF third countries which can be used directly for applications for employment.
- In **Germany**, as noted in the previous section, it was mostly referenced that the EQF is seen as a tool to support recognition legislation and policy. The EQF and NQF might be used in the initial stages of recognition as transparency instruments to identify comparable levels, but other procedures play a greater role. However, in recruitment, international organisations rely on the EQF, for example, in the granting of visas linked to German VET qualifications which use EQF levels.

In Poland, Serbia, and Spain, the impact of the EQF in the recognition of qualifications or integration of migrants was not clear or visible, particularly in Spain, where the development and implementation of the NQF (MECU) is still underway.

- In **Poland**, national stakeholders (including authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), were unclear as to the impact of the EQF on the fair recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications. However, the EQF had set the basis of creating a common conceptual framework for

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<sup>499</sup> ENIC-NARIC. About the ENIC-NARIC networks. <https://www.enic-naric.net/>

<sup>500</sup> Swedish Council for Higher Education. Background paper. <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/before-you-apply/i-want-to-apply/background-paper/>.

<sup>501</sup> Swedish Council for Higher Education. Qualifications Assessment Tool. <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/qualifications-assessment-tool/armenia/magistr-6045>.

understanding and building trust for foreign qualifications, and generally was well perceived (in terms of visibility and comparability). It was perceived that there is a lack of examples of the systemic use of qualification frameworks facilitating the comparison of migrant qualifications, although this is more widely seen in HE. Moreover, it was noted that the NQF has strict system entry criteria, which limits, to some extent, the use of the NQF levels as a supporting tool.

- In **Serbia**, the recognition of foreign qualifications remains in an early stage of development, and recognition is still being carried out according to procedures prior to the NQFs establishment, by the National Centre for the Recognition of Foreign Higher Education Documents (ENIC-NARIC) as part of the Qualifications Agency. The EQF was not referenced as facilitating this process. It was expressed that there is progress being made to improve, particularly in relation to qualifications for employment, and in this the EQF may have a role.

In general, the evidence points to the EQF as a transparency tool, which facilitates, to varying degrees, recognition of qualifications outside the Union, including non-EQF third countries, depending on the national context. For example, in countries with less developed NQFs (e.g. Serbia and Spain), the role of the EQF in recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications was limited. On the other hand, in countries with more developed NQFs, (e.g. Germany and Poland), established frameworks dictate the relevance of EQF as a tool to support recognition. In terms of developments since 2017, the use of the EQF as a tool to support the integration of migrants through the fair recognition of non-EQF third country qualification, is a continuation of efforts made prior to 2017 and is enhanced through EQF activities, which promote common language and frameworks of qualifications between non-EQF third countries and the EQF. Similarly, it was perceived by national stakeholders in Spain and Serbia (countries with less developed NQFs), that, as their qualification frameworks advance, they anticipate a larger role of the EQF in facilitating recognition in the future.

### Increased employability and mobility

This section brings together the evidence to answer the question ‘to what extent and in what manner has the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving increased employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers?’, in the context of non-EQF third country migration. Better understanding of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks and recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications have been outlined in the previous sections. Therefore, this section focuses on the extent to which the EQF has contributed to easing migration integration within the Union. Before providing the assessment that supports the conclusion presented below, first the situation in 2017 and developments since then are presented.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered does not suggest that there are direct impacts from the EQF on the increased employability, mobility, and social integration of migrant learners and workers, although its role in easing the integration of migrants indirectly through the use of the EQF as a tool in recognition was noted. While the EQF can support recognition, other factors impacting recognition and the integration of migrant learners and workers play a greater role. As an example, there remains gaps in overqualification rates of migrants<sup>502</sup>, exacerbated by access barriers to recognition procedures within migrant and refugee communities<sup>503</sup>. These external contextual factors reasonably limit the impact of EQF contribution to the integration of migrants, but rather, the EQF can have a broader and indirect impact on improved understanding and recognition of

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<sup>502</sup> Eurostat (2021). Migration integration statistics -over-qualification. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_over-qualification#cite\\_note-1](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_over-qualification#cite_note-1)

<sup>503</sup> Windisch, H. C., (2020). The relation between refugees' arrival in 2015-2016 and skills recognition at the European level and in Germany. p.4. [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/windisch\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/windisch_bwpat39.pdf)

non-EQF third country qualifications which can facilitate procedures of migrant integration. In countries with less developed NQFs the integration of migrants into labour markets was highlighted by different groups of stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries) to be slowed by inefficient recognition processes, and the EQF has not eased this. Generally, the presence of already established modes of assessment were highlighted as having a greater impact on the integration of migrants, potentially limiting the extent to which the EQF might contribute to increased employability, mobility, and social integration of migrant learners and workers.

## Situation in 2017 and developments since then

As with previous sections, little distinction was made between the EQF pre- and post-2017, and any identified developments can be viewed mostly as a continuation of EQF support in the area of recognition, which can indirectly impact on the employability and mobility of migrants. Employability, mobility, and social integration of migrants is dependent on several national contextual factors, which can include labour market and economic forces, policies, regulation, and hiring practices<sup>504</sup>. As such, it would be expected that the EQF would not directly impact on the integration of migrants, but, instead, would more broadly support recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications. This is supported by the gathered evidence which does not suggest the EQF Recommendation has directly contributed to increasing employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers, before or since 2017.

## Assessment

There are external barriers to integration faced by migrants, which can include the negative perception of non-EQF third countries and institutions when validating qualifications or language barriers<sup>505</sup>. Moreover, while overqualification rates of migrants continue to decline (although they remain higher than for EU citizens<sup>506</sup>), overqualification rates of migrants are more likely to be impacted by national policies and legislation, which reinforce recognition practices<sup>507</sup>. Moreover, in many instances recognition is more widely targeted towards to higher skilled or qualified people<sup>508</sup>. While the EQF could not be expected (nor was it intended), to impact on such limitations, it is perceived by interviewed international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives that there are indirect effects of the EQF on the integration of migrants. These effects are seen as a result of improved diploma recognition and digitisation, which supports labour and student mobility from non-EQF third countries, and the continued development of EQF activities, such as planned or up-coming comparisons, which will broaden the use of the EQF globally.

Moreover, two ENIC-NARIC representatives suggested that because, in their experience, employers are engaged in the process of recognition applications, they indirectly benefit from the EQFs facilitation of qualification recognition. However, limited communication and understanding at a ground-level were thought by a **Polish** national expert to impact trust from employers in non-EQF third country frameworks, limiting the impact of the EQF at this level. While the EQF was seen to have established a common language, which is more accessible, this was deemed more visible and relevant to qualification authorities than employers and educators. One ENIC-NARIC representative, as well as stakeholders

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<sup>504</sup> Bohlinger, Sandra (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

<sup>505</sup> Bohlinger, Sandra (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

<sup>506</sup> In 2020 the over-qualification rate for non-EU citizens was 41.4% compared to 20.8% for nationals. See: Eurostat (2021). Migration integration statistics - over-qualification. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_over-qualification](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migrant_integration_statistics_-_over-qualification)

<sup>507</sup> Bohlinger, Sandra (2019). Ten years after: the 'success story' of the European qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2019.1646413

<sup>508</sup> Murphy, I. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update. Thematic report: Validation of non-formal and informal learning for migrants and refugees

involved in the validation workshop, conducted as part of this study, echoed that more effective communication with end beneficiaries would improve engagement of employers with the EQF. The national expert from Poland suggested that this would work to enhance trust in non-EQF third country qualifications, and, therefore, could beneficially impact hiring practices of employers in relation to non-EQF third country migrants.

As highlighted in previous sections, national stakeholder perceptions from the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), suggested that the role of the EQF in recognition indirectly supports integration of migrants, but that this varies according to national context (e.g. regulation in Germany and the early stage of NQF development in Serbia). These are described in more detail below:

- In **Germany**, respondents indicated that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has had less influence on the integration of migrants than the more general work related to the EQF and DQR (German qualifications framework for lifelong learning), has. Moreover, the EQF has not primarily eased the integration of migrants into the labour market and is not considered suitable for recognition of qualifications awarded in non-EQF third countries, and is, instead, viewed by respondents (public authority representatives and social partners), as a transparency instrument. The Recognition Act (*Anerkennungsgesetz*) supports employability and mobility of migrants, as it regulates and implements the assessment procedures of foreign qualifications; for example, in the case of unregulated professions where an employer might require proof of a formal qualification. Labour market migration is regulated by the Skilled Immigration Act for qualified professionals, the FEG (*Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz*), and is strictly connected to recognition of professional qualifications.
- In **Serbia**, national stakeholders (education and training providers, end beneficiaries), indicated that recognition processes are slower, due to a lack of comparability of qualifications from Asian countries, which dominate the foreign labour force, indicating that the EQF activities cooperating with ASEAN countries is not facilitating the integration of migrants in Serbia. It was not clarified if, or how, the EQF might have impacted or informed these processes. Moreover, the national expert from Serbia elaborated that migrants and refugees often rely on international organisations to support them in the recognition of their qualifications to gain employment, as these processes for this population are not well supported by national level agencies. As would be expected, the implementation of the EQF as a supporting tool in the recognition of non-EQF third country qualification is limited in this context, where the NQF is not yet well established.

In the remaining country case studies (Poland, Spain, and Sweden), it was indicated that either it was too early to assess the impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, or that it was unclear to what extent the EQF had reached its objective in increasing employability, mobility, and the social integration of migrants:

- In **Poland**, it was perceived to be too early to assess any influence of the 2017 EQF recommendation, or even 2008 implementation, on the labour market and relationship with non-EQF third country qualification frameworks. Language skills, such as Polish and English, are considered steep barriers to overcome alongside a lack of credentials, which has contributed to the overqualification of migrants, issues which are not nationally prioritised. High numbers of migrants in Poland undertake Polish extramural exams and later migrate to other EU countries and national stakeholders (authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), raised questions about whether the development of comparable qualifications frameworks in non-EQF third countries might better facilitate this mobility.

- In **Spain** it was also deemed too early to assess the impact of the EQF on migrant populations and qualification recognition, and the EQF is not currently emphasised within this process. More generally, it was noted that the Spanish labour market is poorly regulated, and issues of recognition for migrants from non-EQF third countries mostly occurs in regulated professions. In less regulated professions, such as industrial sectors, work permits can be granted by the police, but there has been increased cooperation between various ministries and the police to clarify conditions of acceptance and speed up the process of granting work permits and integrating migrants into the labour force.
- In **Sweden**, the EQF was generally thought to indirectly support mobility and transparency, through its use within ENIC-NARIC. Of the many integration projects in Sweden<sup>509</sup> these are not associated with the NQF or EQF.

The responses from national stakeholders in the country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), varied, and in general it could be said that there are factors in each country, which limit the extent to which the EQF might contribute to increased employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers. Mostly, this was indicated to be the presence of already established modes of assessment or the development stage of NQFs (as was highlighted in Germany, Serbia, and Spain). The gathered evidence suggests that the EQF as a tool to facilitate recognition is a small part of the process, but as one ENIC-NARIC representative noted, recognition is required for non-EQF third country workers and learners to gain access to employment or studies, and in this way the EQF can be considered to play a small indirect role in supporting mobility and integration. However, the role of the EQF is defined by stronger factors, such as established national level policy and legislation, or regulation practices.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study dealt with the question to what extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to the integration of migrants by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union, and to what extent and in what manner has the 2017 EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving increased employability, mobility, and social integration of migrant learners and workers. The case study shows that the EQF has to a small extent improved the understanding and recognition of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks and qualifications awarded outside the Union, but there is no evidence to support that this has eased the integration of migrant learners and workers, which depends on other factors, such as national level policy and legislation on migration and recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications. EQF AG reports and some interviewed stakeholders (including international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF, and third country representatives), suggest that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has acted as a catalyst for the development of global NQFs and RQFs, and EQF activities have improved cooperation with non-EQF third countries – both as a continuation of the processes before 2017. However, the EQF, and its activities, in general, are only, to a small extent, thought to have indirectly contributed to the integration of learners and workers, and there are still perceived challenges in utilising the EQF for the recognition of qualifications from non-EQF third countries, where there are fewer commonalities with the EQF. In countries in the earlier stages of NQF development it was perceived to be too early to assess the contributions of the EQF. Although, as NQFs become more developed, the application of EQF may prove useful and indicates that the impact of the EQF is dependent on an established qualification framework.

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<sup>509</sup> The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket) [Beviljade projekt 2018 - Enklare vägar till jobb och kompetens - Tillväxtverket \(tillvaxtverket.se\)](#)

In the future, the EQF could consider the national contexts which impact, and in some cases, limit, the use of EQF in recognition practices, and how the EQF can better facilitate understanding of non-EQF third country qualifications, frameworks, and systems in practice. Moreover, more effectively targeting employers and educators with information on the EQF and its role in recognition can help to build trust in non-EQF third country qualifications, which have been fairly recognised, and, therefore, support the integration of migrants with these qualifications. To improve the EQFs contribution to the integration of non-EQF third country migrant learners and workers, EQF activities, such as comparison pilots, could focus on non-EQF third countries with the most relevance to, for example, the EU labour force (e.g. national stakeholders from Serbia indicated the need for improved recognition for qualifications from Asian countries, which dominate migrant labour forces). Moreover, engagement in non-EQF third countries should continue to build visibility of the EQF concept and establish further cooperation with, and understanding of, a wider scope of non-EQF third country qualification frameworks which will greatly improve the extent to which the EQF could facilitate the understanding and recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications and frameworks.

### Case study topic 9: Efficiency: costs associated with running the NCP and implementing the EQF

This case study analyses the costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation for different stakeholders at local-, national-, and EU-levels, as well as efficiency of EQF AG and NCPs. Existing sources provide limited evidence to assess the costs associated with running the NCPs and supporting the implementing of the EQF at national level. This case study therefore looks what the associated funding schemes related to the NCPs at national level are, the activities they conduct, and associated benefits.

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research and country mapping (background information on comparability and portability of qualifications (EQF AG notes and Cedefop inventory), and the Cedefop inventories), the country-level case studies and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey, PC, and workshop results. Country case studies have been conducted in Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovenia. These represent a diversity in the size of countries, the geographical location, the classification of the welfare state, the type of skills-formation system, and the development stage of the NQF. From these four countries, a total of 40 interviewees participated in the country-level consultations on this topic. Among 40 stakeholders consulted six represent public authorities, 12 – authorities working with qualifications, 13 – education and training providers, five – end beneficiaries, and the remaining four – other EQF stakeholders (National Centre for Climate Change representative, individual expert, joint secretariat for the education programs in the field of construction and civil engineering representative, and representative of organisation bridging the gap between labour market needs and education).

Limitations for this case study relate to the fact that consulted stakeholders provided limited evidence on costs and benefits associated with running the NCP and implementing the EQF. In addition, the existing sources provide limited evidence to assess the costs associated with running the NCPs and supporting the implementing of the EQF at national level. As a result, these costs are not quantified in most cases.

### Costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

This chapter brings together the evidence to answer the evaluation questions that seek to review the costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF

Recommendation for different stakeholders at local-, national-, and EU-levels, as well as the review of the proportionality of these costs in relation to the benefits brought to individuals, economy, and society.

As overall conclusion, this section finds that the limited costs are largely outweighed by the benefits. Against EU level costs, estimated around EUR 1.8-2.0 million, the advances in increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, increased trust through working together, exchanging views and experiences, and reviewing the (updates to) referencing of qualification systems to the EQF are valuable to stakeholders. The case studies do point to additional costs at national level, for instance on conducting referencing exercises, putting in place NQF or of maintaining the NCP points. Having a single point of coordination in each country for the EQF is found to be an important way to prioritise developments on the EQF in all countries, and to ensure that the expertise built in terms of human resources is strengthened and built upon. Case studies conducted in the study confirmed that no substantial costs were associated with the activities undertaken by NCPs as follow up to the Recommendation. Also, when taking into account such national level costs, different groups of stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) were in general positive about the efficiency of putting in place national aspects in response to European developments.

### **Situation in 2017 and developments since then**

In 2017, with referencing complete in most EQF countries, national structures had already been put in place to support the implementation of the EQF, such as qualification frameworks, and often, associated legal frameworks, as well as the establishment of competent authorities. Costs associated with the establishment of these structures are therefore not included in this report. This section reviews the available sources of funding for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, after which the possible costs associated with the 2017 EQF Recommendation are explored.

With regard to costs, a review of financial sources at the EU-level shows that roughly EUR 1.8-2.0 million of funds from Erasmus+ has been available on an annual basis for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In addition, Cedefop and ETF provide specific support to the AG. These relatively modest investments have kept the work surrounding the EQF moving over the years and contributed to further incentivise Member States to continue taking steps toward the full implementation of the EQF in their countries. These are complemented by different levels of national investments. At the minimum, Erasmus+ requires 25% co-financing by Member States, but additional investment depends on the stage of development of their NQF, or the type of organisation where the NCP is positioned, and type of activities undertaken. While some NCP representatives indicate that more investments from EU and national sources would allow additional investments in outreach and communication to end beneficiaries, overall different groups of stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) report that the contributions are mostly adequate for the existing level of activity.

While the precise benefits of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot be expressed in financial terms, the advances in increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, increased trust through working together, exchanging views and experiences, and reviewing the (updates to) referencing of qualification systems to the EQF are valuable to stakeholders. Large majorities of stakeholders surveyed in the context of this study (mainly consisting of public authorities), indicated that these benefits are well balanced with, or outweighed by, the costs required for achieving these results; only 10 out of the 104 respondents to the survey (10%) – including public authorities, training providers, and end beneficiaries – thought the costs of providing information on learning outcomes for qualifications in databases and registers outweigh the benefits. For other aspects, the number of respondents that see that the costs outweigh the benefits are lower, such as for the setting up of qualification registers, linking the levels of EQF/NQF to all qualifications in



registers, and conducting communication and outreach activities. Each of these costs has been relatively limited, though this varies considerably across countries, depending in particular on the stage of development of the NQF in 2017 and subsequent years.

When reviewing more specific experiences of a selected number of countries in the running of the AG in practice, EQF AG members were in general positive about the efficiency with which it is run and how it works. Case studies conducted during this study confirmed that no substantial costs were associated with the activities undertaken by NCPs as follow up to the Recommendation. Moreover, having a single point of coordination in each country for the EQF is an important way to prioritise developments on the EQF in all countries, and ensure that the expertise built in terms of human resources is strengthened and built upon.

### National and EU funding sources used for the implementation of the EQF

The Erasmus+ is the key EU-level fund that supports implementation activities of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, at the EU- and national level. Table 27 below summarises these investments allocated to budget headings in Erasmus+ that can be related to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. On average, roughly EUR five million is available annually for supporting these activities.

**Table 27. Allocated investments in Erasmus+ (2014-2020)/ (2021-2027) to implementation of the EQF**

(x1 000 000 EUR)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
<b>Key Action 2: Online tools and services for skills and qualifications – EQF related</b>	0.04	0.07	0.1			0.21
<b>Key Action 2: Europass platform and related tools – EQF related</b>				0.34	.1	0.44
<b>Key Action 3: Transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications – EQF related</b>	0.65	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1.65
<b>Key Action 3: Support for NCP<sup>510</sup></b>	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.42	1.42	7.34
<b>Total per year</b>	2.19	1.82	1.85	2.01	1.77	9.64

Source: authors, based on Erasmus+ Annual Work Programme 2018-2022 and more specific estimates provided by the EC.

Within Key Action 2, Erasmus+ supports cooperation among organisations and institutions. Within the scope of the EQF, Erasmus+ supports the development of online tools, services, and information covering qualifications. Its attention is slightly broader than EQF, as it also includes the development of skill self-assessment tools and the broader Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe portal (between 2018-2020), and its successor on the Europass platform (2021-today). With the move to the Europass portal in 2021, the investments allocated appear to be higher, but this also includes additional elements initiated with the Digital Education Action plan, such as digitally signed credentials, which are strictly speaking not part of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. It is therefore assumed that the actual investments continue to be relatively stable between EUR 1.5-2.0 million. Most relevant from the perspective of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is the interconnection of national databases for qualifications with the other European tools.

Key action 3 in Erasmus+ supports policy development and cooperation. In relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation three areas of work can be identified.

- First of all, DG for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture (EAC) and DG EMPL are supported in contracting expertise on Education and Training; for the entire period under evaluation DG EMPL spent around EUR 150,000 for support to the EQF AG.

<sup>510</sup> This funding is allocated for three-year periods (for 2018-2020 in the 2018 report and 2021-2023 in the 2021 report. The table has distributed these values proportionately to all the years.

- Secondly, under the heading of transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications, Erasmus+ supported a broad range of activities supporting implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, with a particular focus on communication, including the EQF Conference in 2018. This support is available for activities beyond the strict focus of the EQF Recommendation, and, for instance, also includes work around career guidance and validation of non-formal and informal learning. The values in the table have been specified to only include EQF relevant sums, provided separately by the European Commission.
- Thirdly, Erasmus+ offers direct financial support to all National Coordination Points for the EQF that submit a proposal. These budgets are made directly available to NCP every three years, amount to roughly EUR 1.5 million per year, in total, and are capped to 75% co-financing; this means that countries need to finance at least 25% of these costs themselves.

In addition, Cedefop also plays a key role in implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at the EU-level. The detailed reports for AG meetings show the active support it provides to other stakeholders in the AG, as well as individual EU Member States in the years since 2017. It offers support to the organisation of AG meetings, provides technical inputs in preparation and during AG meetings, as well as contributing to the development of EQF guidance material. It also supported together with the European Commission the organisation of peer learning events in the context of the AG. The table below summarises the overall estimated yearly costs in terms of full-time equivalent staff and disbursement for these activities. The increased investments for 2021 and 2022 are related to additional studies conducted in support of its work, including, for instance, the data collection conducted every two years to update its inventory on NQF developments.

**Table 28. Cedefop investments separated for working on EQF web service**

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Staff</b>	2.75 FTE	2.75 FTE	3.65 FTE	4 FTE
<b>Costs reserved (in million EUROS)</b>	0.01	0.02	0.31	0.35

Source: CEDEFOP, Programming document 2019-2021, 2020-2022, 2021-2023, 2022-2024.

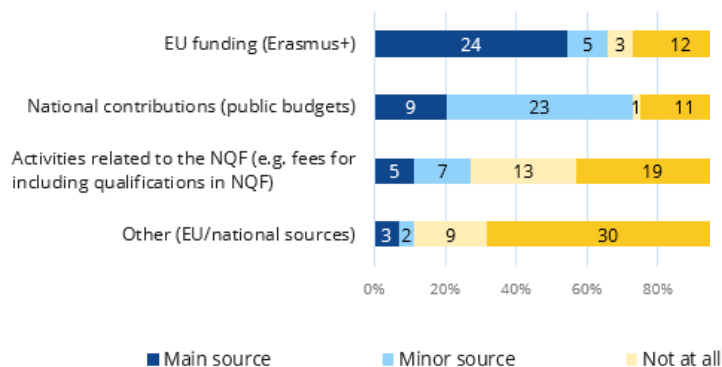
The ETF also provides its expertise to the AG, similarly to Cedefop, but with a focus on the EQF countries outside the EU. In the most recent assessment of its work on qualifications, an estimated five staff members were working in the field of qualifications with partner countries. This estimate does not explicitly distinguish between support for the AG and support directly to partner countries. Based on the evaluation of its work on qualifications for the period 2014-2019, this can be estimated to represent the larger share<sup>511</sup>.

The survey asked AG representatives about the sources of funding for EU-level activity. Its results confirm that the funding mentioned above is indeed the major source of funding, and that grants in Erasmus+ play an important role to implement EU-level EQF activities. National contributions are generally not considered the main source of funding behind EU-level activities (9 out of 44 or 21%), but around half indicate that such national contributions are at least a minor source. No substantial differences can be observed between EQF countries in the EU and outside. No overview exists of the national contributions to EU-level activities, but interviews suggest that these mostly refer to the time national representatives invest, when participating in regular AG meetings, and more specific project work. When reviewing the sources behind activities at national level, respondents more often point to national contributions, mainly from the public budget and, in some cases, in relation to fees charged to NQF users. EU funding is still mentioned as a major source for national activities

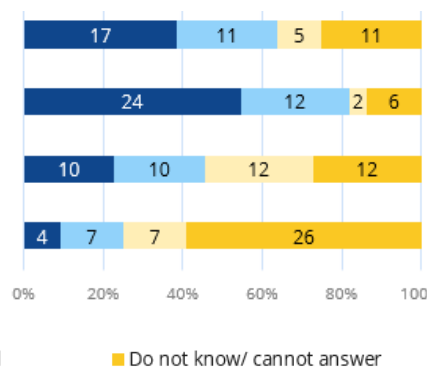
<sup>511</sup> 3s / Ockham IPS (2020), [Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries 2014-2019](#).

by 17 out of 44 (39%) respondents. The next section analyses in more detail what type of costs are covered with these data sources.

**Figure 37. Activities at EU-level (e.g. EQF AG activities, participation in comparisons)**



**Figure 38. Activities at national level (e.g. developing national databases; including qualifications in NQF)**

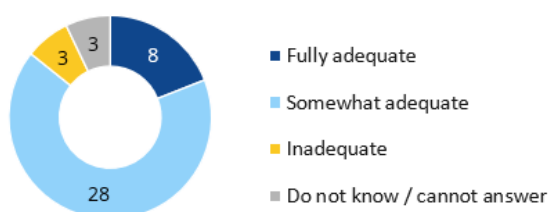


Note: Total (N)=44.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

The majority of respondents (EQF AG members and NCPs) assess the adequacy of the financial resources available to their organisation to conduct their activities in relation to the implementation of the EQF as somewhat adequate (28 of 42 or 67%). Eight of 42, or 19%, think financial resources are fully adequate, while only 3 of 42 or 7% doubt and assess them as inadequate. Respondents in this category explained that they were late to apply for the Erasmus+ grant or that the time spent on these activities is not sufficient to cover all planned activities.

**Figure 39. How do you assess the adequacy of the financial resources available to your organisation to conduct your activities in relation to the implementation of the EQF?**



Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

### Costs and benefits of implementation of the EQF

The activities associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation at national level were supported by a mix of European funds and national contributions. There are no consistent data sources on national budgets, nor can activities related to NQFs be differentiated from costs that would have accrued anyway in managing qualifications. As a result of the diversity of functions attributed to the NCP across the EQF countries and the different stages of development of the NQF, no consistent estimate of costs for national activities can be provided at the aggregate-level.

### Costs and benefits of the organisation in NCP

NCP perform a variety of different functions regarding implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation beyond its immediate scope. A review of the institutional affiliation of NCP shows that it is often positioned with national qualification authorities, who do not only work on the EQF/NQF, but are often in charge of the broader qualification system in the country. While the broader work of these authorities is undoubtedly of relevance to the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, it is not necessarily a consequence of it and often cannot be split out by costs dedicated to the NCP. For instance, in the **Netherlands** a national qualification framework has been put in place since the referencing in 2012<sup>512</sup>. In subsequent years, the NCP has supported the Ministry in preparing a legal framework to formalise the NQF's role in formal law. This work has involved large numbers of stakeholders and demanded a high investment of staff time from within the Ministry and the NCP regarding legal advice, as well as the considerable costs of running internet consultations among end beneficiaries. Without going into the detail of attempting to define such costs, these would not be related to the Recommendation itself, and follow from national decisions, structures, and the operationalisation of certain principles in a national context. For this specific case, for instance, the difficulty of defining a definitive legal framework for the NLQF is related to the fact that the NLQF includes formal and non-formal qualifications alike.

Rather than comparing the substantial variation in costs of the different bodies that function as NCP across the EU, the study first of all attempted to identify the costs of activities that NCP, themselves, link to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The Recommendation specifically calls for Member States to ensure the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCP. To support the costs of such NCP activities, the Erasmus+ contributions (as described above), are a relevant source of support. As presented above, a total of EUR 1.5 million is available per year for distribution among the 37 EQF countries for this purpose. This results in grants that are typically in the range of EUR 20k-60k per year per country, complemented by at least 25% co-financing in each country.<sup>513</sup> Allocations are provided based on workplans shared with the European Commission. Typically, the national contributions for NCP are considerably higher than the minimum foreseen by Erasmus+, because NCP conduct more activities than those proposed in the workplan used for requesting financial support. In the **Netherlands** (which receives roughly EUR 60k annually), the Erasmus+ contribution is considered a welcome, but relatively small share of the NCP's annual operational budget; it covers roughly 10% of its annual costs<sup>514</sup>. In **Slovenia**, the European contribution to supporting operational costs of the NCP is estimated to be roughly one-third of its budgeted EUR 165k annual costs<sup>515</sup>. Having a single contact point for EQF related matters is found to be an efficient means of organisation. In the countries where this was studied more in-depth, the NCP has a good reputation, and is highly regarded as the central point of contact for the various ministries and other stakeholders involved. From that perspective the limited operational costs found in this section are proportionate to such benefits, which are a crucial prerequisite for effectively organising qualification frameworks at national level, informed by relevant developments in other EQF countries.

### Costs and benefits of implementation of the Recommendation – supported by public funds

To identify the possible specific costs that can be linked to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the starting point is the Recommendation's suggestion that NCP at national level support the referencing of national qualification frameworks to the EQF, and conducting activities to

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<sup>512</sup> K. van der Sanden et al (2012), [The referencing document of The Dutch National Qualification Framework to the European Qualification Framework](#).

<sup>513</sup> European Commission (2018), Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, title 3.40.

<sup>514</sup> Based on interviews with the Dutch NCP during the case study phase.

<sup>515</sup> Based on interviews with the Slovenian NCP during the case study phase.

bring the EQF closer to individuals and organisations. The costs associated with these two main tasks are further explored below and compared against qualitative insights of benefits collected in the case study countries.

It is, however, important to take the different stages of development of NQF across Europe into account. The 2017 EQF Recommendation largely builds on provisions that had already been introduced by the 2008 EQF Recommendation. Even regarding the specific functions for NCP, these can be seen as “sustaining” and “fine-tuning” of existing developments and actions already taken in the framework of national qualification systems. This does not necessarily consist of substantial changes or new activities; in many of the countries, most of the recommended actions and solutions had already been concluded, or at least initiated, to some extent. This means in practice that the nature of the costs related to the implementation of the Recommendation vary substantially across the individual countries and cannot be systematically compared.

This is most obvious when mapping the support NCP provide in the (updated) referencing of NQF to the EQF. These costs no longer apply to most of the countries, as referencing is concluded by almost all countries (see chapter 3). In the timeframe of the 2017 EQF Recommendation referencing was conducted by Romania (2018), Serbia (2020), and Albania (2021), and updates were submitted by France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales, England/Northern Ireland). While an exact price estimate cannot be given, the costs for referencing are considered substantial. It requires the extensive involvement of national qualification authorities, as well as broader stakeholders and (international) experts to reflect on the report. After presenting a first draft to the AG, normally various rounds of comments take place, after which the referencing report is further revised by the national representatives. The extensive work around referencing has the benefit of increasing the quality of the report, and, as such, contribute to the transparency of the process at a European-level.

Beyond such costs, the provision of information and communication on matters related to the NQF and EQF are common functions of NCP. Ireland specifies in its annual report that the ongoing promotion and communication of the new upgraded Europass platform and the EQF to national key stakeholders across higher and further education, as well as the general public, are the explicit objective of its proposal for Erasmus+ support<sup>516</sup>. Denmark received among the lowest contributions from Erasmus+ (15k per year respectively), and uses this allocation to cover the costs of its website. NCP staff note, however, that this amount does not allow it to conduct any outreach activities. No information is available about the financial contribution by their national government. In Slovenia, the annual budget of the NCP focuses considerable attention to outreach activities, including the provision of information and communication on matters related to the NQF and EQF, as well as maintaining the national register of qualifications. Results of this work are seen as a substantial benefit that clearly outweigh their costs. National qualification databases, with information on NQF levels offer insights into all individual qualifications that can be obtained in a country. The result is a significant increase in the transparency and comparability of national qualifications systems, which benefits a wide range of users: participants in education at all levels of the system, employees, employers, educational institutions, expert panels, guidance counsellors, and others. Subsequently, by developing such registers in other countries according to comparable guidelines that allow comparisons with other European qualifications further opens up such gains in transparency and comparability to an even broader range of users.

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<sup>516</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2022), [Annual report 2021](#), p. 20.

## Costs and benefits of support by private stakeholders for implementation of the Recommendation

Even in countries where the 2017 EQF Recommendation is considered implemented, NCP continue to have a role in managing the process of including qualifications in some qualification frameworks. Particularly in NQF that allow for non-formal qualifications to be included, qualification authorities are able to recover some of their costs through fees charged to providers that want to include qualifications in the national framework. Such costs imposed on stakeholders cannot directly be related to the Recommendation, because it does not specify how qualifications are to be included in national frameworks. These are, however, relevant to consider from the perspective of stakeholders, who also assess the EQF and NQF against this experience. The experience in four Member States with active procedures for including non-formal qualifications was reviewed, and shows a relatively similar approach.

In **Denmark**, for instance, formal degrees can apply for inclusion in the national framework free of charge, but non-formal education providers have to pay for the application process. National stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), find the contribution reasonably small (DKK 33 000, or roughly EUR 1 800 per application), but the smallest education providers indicate that the costs to meet the requirement beyond this fee can be substantial, in terms of staff investments<sup>517</sup>. In **Poland**, similar fees were found for including non-formal qualifications, which sums up to 11 000 PLN (EUR 2 100), when combining all relevant costs per qualification<sup>518</sup>. In the **Netherlands** providers of non-formal qualifications are also required pay a similar-sized fee for including individual qualifications in the NQF (EUR 2 500 for organisations that are already passed a quality assurance check<sup>519</sup>). Similar concerns are mentioned in relation to the considerable amounts of time, efforts, and external costs to complete the application, such as hiring the expertise to describe the qualification in terms of learning outcomes, or outsourcing the examination process to meet the quality requirements of the NQF. The NCP uses the funds collected in this way to cover the cost of assessing the application, but also for roughly half of its annual operational budget<sup>520</sup>. While some stakeholders indicate that the costs can be substantial, particularly for smaller providers, the fact that these also apply for including their qualifications in the NQF underlines that for them the benefits outweigh the costs. Private training providers in the **Netherlands** indicated in interviews that the existence of these procedures and the possibility of including qualifications clearly outweigh the benefits; their programmes undergo a substantially better-quality assurance process, and inspires them to improve the link between the educational programme, examination, and the described learning outcomes of qualifications. Labour market stakeholders in the Netherlands also identify such benefits, and are positive of having such an independent level indication, in the complex market of non-formal qualifications<sup>521</sup>.

## Assessment

Looking at the efficiency of activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF in their country, around a third (see Figure 40) of respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities), think that costs and benefits are in balance. It is worth mentioning that almost half of the respondents were not aware of or could not answer the question. However, only a minority think that the costs outweigh the benefits. Respondents do not distinguish

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<sup>517</sup> [Evaluering af niveauvurdering og indplacering af private og offentlige uddannelsesprogrammer | EVA](#)

<sup>518</sup> <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/o-zsk/oplaty>

<sup>519</sup> NCP NLQF (2022), Tariefstelling NCP NLQF 2023: voorstel

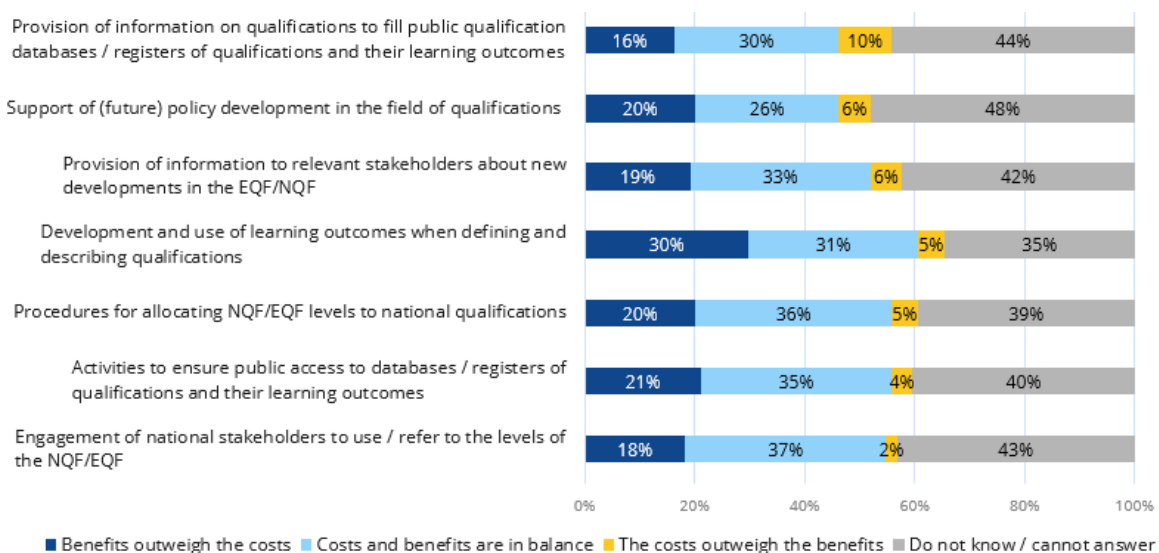
<sup>520</sup> Based on interviews with NCP staff in the Netherlands.

<sup>521</sup> NIDAP Research (2019), B2B NLQF Overzicht Leven Lang Lereren markt Nederland Gebruik NLQF/EQF bij bedrijven en instellingen, p. 11.

between most activities in their efficiency assessment, except for the provision of information on qualifications to fill public qualification databases. This category was given the lowest efficiency scores, with (10 of 104 or 10% think that costs outweigh the benefit; 17 of 104 or 16% - that benefits outweigh the cost). Respondents particularly mentioned that having European-wide multilingual information system is of relatively limited benefit to users; the main benefit of this work is to provide information on the national level of qualifications.

The most positive assessment was evaluated development and use of learning outcomes, when defining and describing qualifications (31 of 104 or 30% think that benefits outweigh the costs), activities to ensure public access to databases and their learning outcomes (22 of 104 or 21%), and support of (future) policy development in the field of qualifications (21 of 104 or 20%). This underlines the success of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, which first introduced the role of learning outcomes in defining and comparing qualifications. Respondents indicate the benefits in relation to implementation of the EQF must be seen not only in immediate financial terms, but also by its social benefits.

**Figure 40. How do you assess the efficiency (rate between costs and benefits) of each of the following activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF in your country**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

## Efficiency of the EQF AG and NCPs

### Situation in 2017 and developments since then

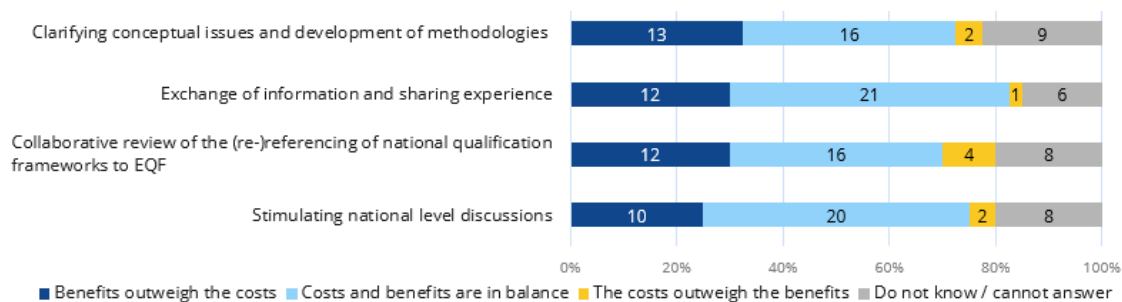
This chapter brings together the evidence to answer the evaluation questions on the efficiency of the work of the EQF AG and NCPs. The section offers an in-depth review of the perceived efficiency of the AG, followed by that of NCP.

#### Efficiency of AG

The EQF AG is generally seen as a relevant source of insight, peer learning, and communication. The members of the EQF AG show that the number of issues analysed, and research conducted (or presented) is an invaluable source of knowledge, which they later pass on to national stakeholders and decision makers. Respondents with experience in interacting in the AG were asked to provide their assessment on the efficiency of its work.

Around 18 out of 40<sup>522</sup> (45%) of the respondents thought that costs and benefits were roughly in balance, with around 12 out of 40<sup>523</sup> (30%) indicating that the benefits outweigh the costs. Only a small minority (around 2 out of 40<sup>524</sup> or 5%) thought that the costs outweighed the benefits. Such concerns are, for instance, focused on the targeted costs associated with a small number of countries involved in a referencing process.

**Figure 41. How do you assess the efficiency (rate between costs and benefits) of each of the following activities undertaken by the EQF Advisory Group**



Note: Total (N)=40.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

Other concerns related to the costs of the AG are linked to the time investment necessary by its members, particularly for the assessment of referencing reports. Interviewed respondents in case study countries (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), acknowledged that doing this work in a European framework is important to secure trust in each other's referencing reports. While one could consider increasing the efficiency of this process by not involving all members in the referencing process, but instead, for instance, giving more autonomy to a sub-group<sup>525</sup>, the question is whether the level of trust is sufficient to be able to do so. From that perspective these costs are made, not only against the framework of referencing, but are in fact an investment in building trust, which stakeholders highly value. The same is true for other AG work, such as referencing international qualifications, non-EQF third countries.

While these topics are relevant to future developments at European-level, discussions at AG-level, so far, have no immediate implications for the national implementation of the EQF. Another possible suggestion may, therefore, be that the work in sub-committees, or project groups within the AG on future developments, can be more explicitly split from issues that have immediate implications for the implementation of the EQF in a national context.

Another point regarding the efficiency identified in the case study interviews is related to the experience of AG meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of six consecutive meetings were conducted online, which showed that it is possible to advance without convening in person. Some respondents suggested that a mix of online and face-to-face

<sup>522</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (16 out of 40 or 40%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (21 out of 40 or 53%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (16 out of 40 or 40%); Stimulating national level discussions (20 out of 40 or 50%).

<sup>523</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (13 out of 40 or 33%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (12 out of 40 or 30%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (12 out of 40 or 30%); Stimulating national level discussions (10 out of 40 or 25%).

<sup>524</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (2 out of 40 or 5%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (1 out of 40 or 3%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (4 out of 40 or 10%); Stimulating national level discussions (2 out of 40 or 5%).

<sup>525</sup> At the moment, the AG already identifies reviewers for referencing reports, who provide the most substantive feedback. However, the discussions about the report are always done in plenary, with the involvement of all AG members.



meetings could reduce the costs of the AG, while keeping the level of productivity stable. Doing so would require additional support in making available the relevant documents and discussion points. One respondent indicated that the documents for the AG, available on the EC webpage on working groups, is not easily accessible by members.

### Efficiency of NCP

The efficiency of the work by NCP is closely related to that of the overall implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The way that NCP are organised in different EQF countries also determines the extent to which the way that they operate, and their internal efficiency are assessed. In **Slovenia**, for instance, the efficiency of the work of the EQF NCP is assessed annually through reporting to the Supervisory Board of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia and responsible bodies on national level. In **Poland**, the work of the NCP is taken up directly by Ministerial department Division of Integrated Qualifications System in the Department of Strategy, Qualifications, and Vocational Education of the Ministry of Education and Science. The unit provides substantive functions, and also supports the minister in, for example, levelling qualifications in the general and VET domain, coordinating the work of specific ministers in the NQF, organising NQF Stakeholder Council meetings, and developing promotion strategy for NQF. The unit is also responsible for overseeing, guiding, and supporting the NQF projects realised at the Educational Research Institute. Its central position in the Ministry regarding other work of qualifications ensures that the Polish NCP is adequately placed, and efficiently uses the limited human resources available. In the **Netherlands**, the NCP is hosted by an external organisation that receives an annual stipend for its expenses. All of its stakeholders indicate that the work of the NCP is appreciated and efficient. There are no reasons to doubt that the work is not done efficiently. Furthermore, there are continuous developments to make the procedures within the NCP more efficient. For instance, a portal was developed to submit the applications saving a lot of paperwork for both the applicants and the experts having to assess the applications. Also, different validity checks are designed to ease the burden for the applicant and expert for those applicants that already have a quality label.

### Assessment

The case study review of perceived efficiency of the AG and NCP find factors that influence efficiency with which the results were achieved. EQF AG members consider the organisation of the AG as an efficient forum that provides relevant insights, peer learning, and communication. Participation can be intense and time-consuming for participants, but this is still considered to outweigh its costs. The restrictions, due to COVID-19, brought the experience of online meetings and showed that, despite the benefits of in-person physical meetings, some discussion and interactions can also be organised online. In addition, the organisation for the implementation of the EQF provisions in NQF are found to be largely efficient. The variety in types and functions of NCP across different EQF countries means that their costs and benefits cannot easily be compared, but overall different groups of stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) are convinced of the cost-efficiency of their operations.

### Conclusions and lessons learned

This case study provides additional insights in the sources of funding for implementation of the EQF and compared the costs and benefits related to it, both at European-level and at national level.

A total of roughly EUR 5.0 million of funds from Erasmus+ has been available on an annual basis for the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. In addition, Cedefop and ETF provide specific support to the AG, for instance, through mapping of progress and supporting conceptual work for a total of an average EUR 0.25 million per year, complemented by roughly 7-9 FTE of their experts' time. These relatively modest investments have kept the work surrounding the EQF moving over the years, and

contributed to further incentivise Member States to continue taking steps toward the full implementation of the EQF in their countries. These funds are complemented by national investments. First of all, the Erasmus+ investments are provided on the condition of national co-financing, and additional investments in the implementation of different aspects are common, even though a rough financial estimate cannot be provided due to the different stages of NQF development, traditions in qualification systems, and operationalisation of the NQF. A majority of consulted respondents across all stakeholder types (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers) confirm that the available financial sources are adequate to the needs of effective implementation.

While the benefits of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot be expressed in financial terms, the advances in increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, increased trust through working together, exchanging views and experiences, and reviewing the (updates to) referencing of qualification systems to the EQF are seen by different groups of stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), as a tangible value that outweighs the costs. The costs of operating the AG at EU-level are relatively limited. The same can be said about the costs related to the implementation of specific provisions of the Recommendation at the national level, such as setting up qualification registers, linking the levels of EQF/NQF to all qualifications in these registers, and conducting communication and outreach activities.

When reviewing more specific experiences of a select number of countries with the running of the AG in practice, EQF AG members were in general positive about the efficiency with which it is run and how it works. Participation in the AG is considered a time-intensive activity, that national authorities nominating representatives should duly budget for, but also provide participants with a substantial level of insights in how qualification systems in Europe work. The concrete experiences gained by participants cannot easily be estimated in financial terms, but could help them becoming a reference also in their own countries on the NQF/EQF.

Reviewing the efficiency of NCP overall is challenging, due to the large variety in how the NCP is organised, their scope of activities, as well as overall differences in stages of development of NQF. Stakeholders interviewed in the framework of this case study (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), all underline that the activities undertaken by NCP can be conducted in a cost-efficient way. Having a single point of coordination in each country for the EQF is an important way to prioritise developments of the EQF in all countries, and to ensure that the expertise built in terms of human resources is strengthened and built upon.

## Case study topic 10: Relevance: future of the EQF against context of the twin transition and future challenges to the labour market

This case study analyses to what extent the objectives and specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant in the context of recent and future technological and broader EU policy developments<sup>526</sup>. The relevance of the objectives and specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, in this case study, is understood as their correspondence to the changing needs of different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholder groups. This case study, therefore, looks whether the design and implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation corresponds to the current and future needs of the different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholder groups.

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<sup>526</sup> This case study provides input to answer the following EQs: EQ17.

This case study brings together evidence from the European-level desk research, country mapping and interviews, the country-level case studies, and consultations with national stakeholders, as well as the survey, workshop, and PC results. Country-level case studies were conducted in five countries, namely Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. In total 39 persons participated in the country-level consultations on this topic as (group) interview respondents<sup>527</sup>. Among the 39 (group) interview respondents, eight represent public authorities, 12 – authorities working with qualifications, 11 – education providers, seven – training providers, one – end beneficiaries, and the remaining one – other EQF stakeholder (institute for professional training representative).

The five countries consulted represent a diversity in size, the geographical location, the classification of the well-fare state, the development stage of the NQF, and whether the EQF referencing took place before 2017, or not, and whether the report underwent a review<sup>528</sup>. Three of five countries (Lithuania, Portugal, Sweden), contributing to this case study had their NQFs referenced to EQF before 2017 and the remaining two (Finland, Romania) did the referencing early after adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (in 2017 and 2018). Therefore, most of the countries have substantial experience of EQF implementation to be able to form opinions on its continuous relevance, and provide insights for its further development. The exception to this is **Sweden** where the start of the use of NQF has been relatively slow, and many stakeholders are not aware of the particularities of 2017 EQF Recommendation.

This case study has a few limitations:

- The key limitation is that European-level desk research and country mapping did not provide information on the needs of different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholder target groups at the time of the adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Therefore, the baseline for comparison of how those needs have evolved is not available. Considering this, the study looks at correspondence of the design and implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation goals and specific provisions only to current and potential future needs of different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholder groups.
- Another limitation is that there is no documented evidence on the needs, especially, potential future needs, of different 2017 EQF Recommendation stakeholder groups. This case study, therefore, relies extensively on self-reported data provided by stakeholders consulted in countries selected for the case study, survey, workshop and PC participants, and interview respondents. This implies that information provided by stakeholders in different countries, where case studies were conducted might be unbalanced in some instances. This is because stakeholders in some countries reported their needs more comprehensively than in others and country case studies targeted slightly different stakeholder groups. For example, the majority of stakeholders consulted for **Lithuanian** case study (5 of 8) represent public authorities or authorities working with qualifications, while in **Finland** 4 of 6 consulted stakeholders represent education and training providers. In **Sweden**, the majority of consulted stakeholders represent either authorities working with qualifications (3 of 8), or education and training providers (3 of 8). A more detailed presentation of the different stakeholder groups targeted for the country case studies is provided in Annex 1. Detailed methodological approach.

The above limitations are mitigated in the text of the case study by clearly stating (where possible), the country and type of stakeholders consulted, critically analysing the data

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<sup>527</sup> See more details on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex for an overview of the type of organisations consulted.

<sup>528</sup> See the general information on the case study approach in the methodological section of the synthesis report annex.

collected and avoiding generalisations of the data collected through the country case studies.

## Continuous relevance of 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives and specific provisions

This section aims to answer the question ‘to what extent the provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant in the context of recent and future technological and broader EU policy developments?’. Ageing societies, twin (green and digital) transitions and migratory pressures alter the social and economic contexts across the EU in which the EQF is implemented.

Wider EU policy initiatives that came into force since the adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation impact the policy context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation is implemented. Among the policy initiatives having an impact on the continuous relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the European Skills Agenda (2020), and its accompanying specific policy instruments, such as the VET Recommendation<sup>529</sup>, the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials<sup>530</sup> and the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts<sup>531</sup> as well as other initiatives such as the Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition,<sup>532</sup> or the Europass Decision of 2018<sup>533</sup> can be mentioned.

As overall **conclusion**, the evidence gathered suggests that all 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives remain very relevant today and their relevance is expected to increase in the light of recent social, economic, and policy changes. All groups of consulted stakeholders agree that no changes to the general structure and framework of the EQF are needed. Concerning specific EQF provisions, however, there is room for adjustments or further strengthening of their implementation to keep up with the changing EQF stakeholder needs:

- Related to the EQF reference framework, consulted EQF stakeholders find it challenging to reference micro-credentials and qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings. It is indicated that not enough guidance is currently provided in this regard.
- Concerning the implementation of quality assurance criteria, consulted EQF stakeholders note that currently a common and systematic approach to their application to online and non-formal learning is lacking. The coordination and facilitation of this process is not sufficient.
- Regarding databases and registers, consulted stakeholders emphasise that the level of development of national databases/registers differs significantly across the EQF countries, and facilitation of their further development and integration across the EQF countries needs to be strengthened. Databases/registers should also be more functional (e.g. searchable via links with ESCO).

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<sup>529</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16.

<sup>530</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 10–25.

<sup>532</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, [OJC 444](#), 10.12.2018, p. 1-8.

<sup>533</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

- The facilitation of levelling of international qualifications, according to EQF stakeholders, is currently lacking. Further facilitation of the development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks is also required, as is the provision of guidance on their referencing to the EQF.
- Regarding comparison with third-country qualifications and their frameworks, EQF stakeholders emphasise that further facilitation of referencing of qualifications of EU Eastern and Southern neighbourhood countries (that are currently not part of EQF), is needed.
- The revision of the approach to communication and outreach of EQF to the wider public is requested to adapt the communication content and means to different EQF target groups, make it more structured and ensure that the potential practical use and limitations of EQF are clearly outlined.

## The continuous relevance of 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives

The context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted has significantly changed since 2017, due to social and economic developments and various EU policy initiatives. Demographic developments, such as consistently low birth rates and higher life expectancy, result in ageing societies in many EQF countries. For example, the average share of people aged 60 and more across EQF countries has increased from 23,7% in 2017, to 26,2 % in 2022<sup>534</sup>. This in turn increases the pressure on the education systems to up- and reskill workers to maintain labour potential and resilient societies<sup>535</sup>. Twin green and digital transitions also bring new challenges resulting in profound shifts in skills required by the labour market<sup>536</sup>. For example, the European Commission has highlighted that 90% of jobs currently require some kind of digital skills<sup>537</sup>. In 2021, however, only 54% of Europeans had at least basic digital skills<sup>538</sup>. Cedefop underlines that approximately 46% of the adult population, aged 25-64, need up and reskilling, due to a low level of education and low cognitive and digital skills<sup>539</sup>. Furthermore, many EQF countries are affected by the continuous influx of migrants, recently increased by an unprecedented inflow of people fleeing from the unprovoked Russian military aggression and invasion of Ukraine, which affects the adaptability of education and training systems, and puts the recognition of foreign qualifications in the European labour market at the forefront<sup>540</sup>.

All the above developments alter the needs of EQF stakeholders. EQF stakeholders consulted during the survey (mainly consisting of public authorities, see Figure 42), and PC (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) believe digital transition (64% (65 out of 102) of survey and 49% (132 out of 267) of PC respondents), and migration (66% (67 out of 102) of survey and 22%

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<sup>534</sup> Own calculations, based on Eurostat data:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO\\_PJANIND\\_custom\\_5775301/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_PJANIND_custom_5775301/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>535</sup> See for example: European Commission (2020), European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change

<sup>536</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council (COM(2022)289) "2022 Strategic Foresight Report. Twinning the green and digital transitions in the new geopolitical context": <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0289&qid=1658824364827>

<sup>537</sup> European Commission. (2018). Digital Education Action Plan. [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en).

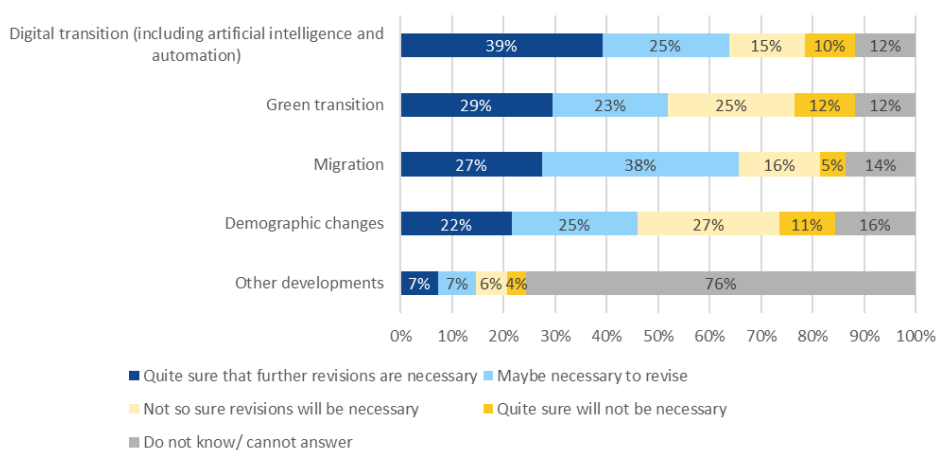
<sup>538</sup> European Commission. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022. Thematic chapters

<sup>539</sup> Cedefop (2020). *Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways: Vol. 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series, No 112. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/691134>

<sup>540</sup> See for instance ETF conversation on this topic: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/achieving-fair-recognition-migrants-qualifications> and Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 of 5 April 2022 on the recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554&from=EN>

(58 out of 267) of PC respondents), to be the key macro-trends altering their needs and potentially requiring changes of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. The importance of migration in altering their needs is confirmed by different stakeholder groups consulted (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries) in four (**Lithuania, Romania, Sweden, and Portugal**) out of five case study countries (**Finland** being an exception). No significant differences among the stakeholder groups are identified. Migration, especially the recent influx of displaced people from Ukraine, has already significantly altered the needs of **Lithuanian** stakeholders<sup>541</sup> making the recognition of the previous qualifications of the displaced people a very pressing issue.

**Figure 42. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following macro-trends will impact the needs of EQF stakeholders in ways that will require further revising the Recommendation in the coming years?**



Note: Total (N)=105, N other = 82.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

The green transition and demographic changes are seen by consulted EQF stakeholders as having a somewhat lesser impact on their needs. Concerning the green transition, survey and PC respondent opinions differ. The green transition is seen as having less impact by PC (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), than survey (mainly consisting of public authorities) respondents, with only 5% (14 out of 267) of PC respondents seeing it as a key macro-trend impacting the development of qualifications and their frameworks. In addition, green transition has not been mentioned among the key macro-trends altering their needs by consulted country case study stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries).

Concerning demographic changes, 46% (47 out of 102) of survey respondents are 'quite sure' or believe that 'maybe' this macro-trend will require revisions of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation with consensus among stakeholder groups. Among PC stakeholders 17% (45 out of 267) believe demographic changes to be the key macro-trend having an impact on the development of qualifications and their frameworks. Among the consulted country case study stakeholders only Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly public authorities), mentioned demographic changes as one of the key macro-trends altering their needs<sup>542</sup>. Demographic developments are of particular importance to Lithuanian

<sup>541</sup> According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) data, Lithuania has welcomed more than 70 000 displaced people from Ukraine<sup>21</sup> since the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine, constituting approximately 2.5 percent of its population. This has been and remains the largest inflow of displaced people in the history of Lithuania. Source: UNCHR, *Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine situation. Country chapter: Lithuania, 2023*

<sup>542</sup> Different stakeholder groups consulted during the targeted online survey, open public consultation and stakeholder consultations in countries selected for country case studies are presented in Annex 1. Detailed methodological approach

stakeholders considering that Lithuania has one of the fastest ageing societies among the EU countries<sup>543</sup>. This shows that the importance which is attributed to different macro-trends as key factors altering the needs of EQF stakeholders depends on the national context.

Different survey respondents mentioned several other macro-trends changing the needs of EQF stakeholders in a way that might require adjustment/strengthening of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. These included changes in life expectancy of the population in Europe, increasing importance of remote education, changes in perceptions towards democracy, and eroding trust in governments and institutions. According to survey respondents:

- Changes in life expectancy resulting in a prolonged participation in the labour market might require strengthening the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions supporting the goals of increasing the support for flexible learning pathways and facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment.
- Increasing importance of remote education and changes in perceptions towards democracy, and governments might require revising the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions related to the objectives of achieving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications and building trust and understanding in qualifications systems.
- Democratic backsliding,<sup>544</sup> currently present in some EQF countries, might result in decreasing the overall trust in qualification systems from other countries.

Various EU policy initiatives adopted since 2017, for example, Europass Decision of 2018<sup>545</sup>, the Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition<sup>546</sup>, the VET Recommendation<sup>547</sup>, the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials<sup>548</sup> and the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts<sup>549</sup> also change the context of EQF implementation and alter the needs of EQF stakeholders.

According to survey respondents, the emergence of micro-credentials is one of the key policy developments changing the needs of EQF stakeholders and requiring adjustment/strengthening of the implementation of some of the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions (70% (71 out of 102) of survey respondents are 'quite sure' or believe that 'maybe' this requires adjustments/strengthening). No significant differences among the stakeholder groups are identified – more than half of respondents in each stakeholder group believe that micro-credentials change the needs of EQF stakeholders and require adjustment/strengthening of the implementation of some of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

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<sup>543</sup> Bouman R., Horne R., Milasi S., Prasad N. (2015). Ageing and labour market implications for Lithuania. ILO research department working paper No. 6 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms\\_424066.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_424066.pdf)

<sup>544</sup> For example, Poland and Hungary are often cited as examples of democratic backsliding. See, for example, Bernhard M. (2021). Democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary. *Slavic Review* 80(3), 585-607. doi:10.1017/slr.2021.145

<sup>545</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

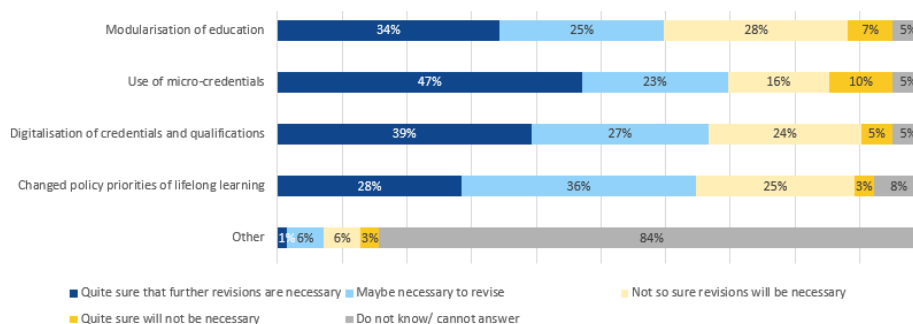
<sup>546</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, [OJ C 444](#), 10.12.2018, p. 1-8.

<sup>547</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16.

<sup>548</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 10–25.

provisions. Guidance on referencing micro-credentials to NQF and EQF was identified as one of the key areas for future EQF development also by four (**Lithuanian, Finnish, Romanian, and Swedish**) out of five country stakeholders contributing to country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries). The need to adapt the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to the challenges posed by the emergence of micro-credentials was confirmed by the online validation workshop participants.

**Figure 43. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following EU policy developments will impact the needs of EQF stakeholders in ways that will require further revising the Recommendation in the coming years?**



Note: Total (N)=102, N other = 70.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

Digitalisation of credentials and qualifications, changing policy priorities of lifelong learning and modularisation of education are seen too as altering the needs of EQF stakeholders and requiring adjustments/strengthening of the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation by the survey respondents (68 (67%), 66 (65%), and 61 (60%) out of 102 respondents respectively are ‘quite sure’ or believe that ‘maybe’ these policy developments will require 2017 EQF Recommendation adjustments/strengthening). No significant differences among the stakeholder groups are identified – more than half of respondents in each stakeholder group believe that the above policy changes alter the needs of EQF stakeholders and require adjustment/strengthening of the implementation of some of the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions. The above policy developments, however, were not emphasised as altering the needs of stakeholders consulted in the five countries where country case studies were carried (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), out and no details on how specifically these changes alter the needs of EQF stakeholders were provided by survey respondents.

In view of the significant changes of the context in which the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted and subsequent changes in EQF stakeholders’ needs, the relevance of its objectives is only increased. For example, demographic changes and the twin transition reinforce the 2017 EQF recommendation goals of increasing the support for flexible learning pathways and facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment. On a policy-level, these goals are strengthened by the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials<sup>550</sup> and the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts<sup>551</sup>. The Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials strengthens the role of EQF as a facilitator of a more structured and transparent inclusion of micro-credentials at the same time opening up more

<sup>550</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 10–25



flexible learning opportunities. The Recommendation on individual learning accounts<sup>552</sup> reaffirms the relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, by recommending that introduction of individual learning accounts should be accompanied by a national public registry of opportunities in training, career guidance, and validation that are eligible for support, which could make use of the European Learning Model built on the data fields described in Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Increased migration further underlines the relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives of achieving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications, and building trust and understanding in qualification systems from other countries. On a policy-level the relevance of these goals is strengthened by the Europass Decision of 2018<sup>553</sup>, the Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition<sup>554</sup> and the VET Recommendation<sup>555</sup>. The Europass Decision of 2018<sup>556</sup> bases information fields on Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, and requires Europass web tools to make reference to EQF levels reinforcing the role of EQF in achieving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications. The Council Recommendation on Automatic Recognition regards the EQF as a key instrument for its implementation to which all national qualification frameworks and systems should be referenced contributing to the attainment of the 2017 EQF Recommendation goal of building trust and understanding in qualification systems from other countries and further increasing its relevance. The VET Recommendation, through its targets of increasing the mobility among VET learners, and integrating provisions of quality (EQAVET) and credit systems (EQAVET) strengthens the relevance of EQF framework as an enabler of such mobility and puts additional emphasis on the principles of quality assurance and credit systems outlined in the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

The continuous relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives is confirmed by the survey<sup>557</sup> (mainly consisting of public authorities, see Figure 44), PC (someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), respondents and country case study stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries). However, some differences regarding the most relevant objectives are seen among the survey and PC respondents. Both survey (92% (94 out of 102)), and PC (95% (254 out of 267)) respondents with consensus among stakeholder groups believe building trust and understanding in qualifications and qualification systems from other countries to be among the most relevant objectives.

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<sup>552</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 26–34.

<sup>553</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

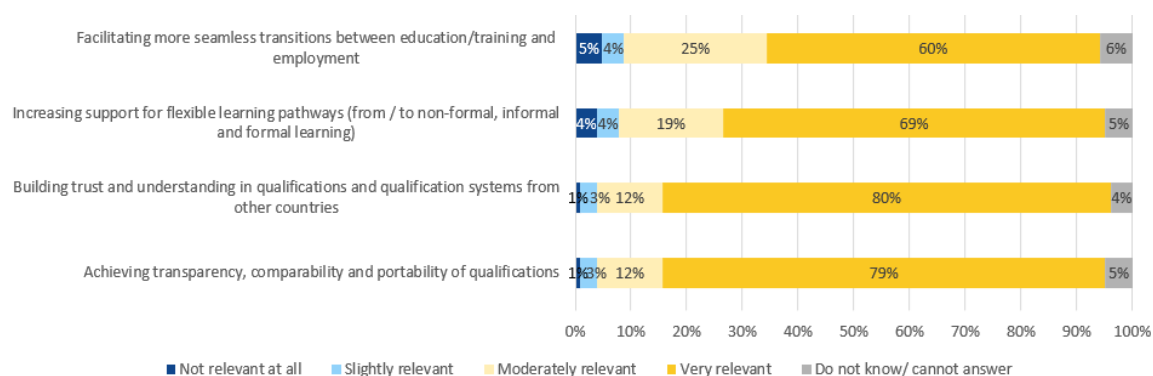
<sup>554</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, [OJC 444](#), 10.12.2018, p. 1-8.

<sup>555</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, [OJC 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16.

<sup>556</sup> Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC, [OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

<sup>557</sup> Survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 2022.

**Figure 44. To what extent do you think the following objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant today?**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: own elaboration based on online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, 202

The opinion regarding the goal of achieving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications of survey and PC stakeholders are also in consensus. PC stakeholders (97% (258 out of 267)) see it as the most relevant, while survey respondents (91% (93 out of 102)) view it as the second most relevant objective. Furthermore, some differences among the stakeholder groups can be seen. Representatives of public authorities seem to believe it to be more relevant than other stakeholder groups. Among survey respondents the majority (80% (53 out of 66)) of public authority representatives believe this 2017 EQF Recommendation objective to be 'very relevant', while 48% (eight out of 17) of end beneficiaries, 81% (nine out of 11) of education and training providers, and 70% (7 out of 10) of respondents under 'other' category believe this objective to be either 'moderately relevant', or feel like they do not know/cannot assess its relevance.

Facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment, and increasing support for flexible learning pathways are seen as relevant by 92% (245 out of 267) of PC and respectively 85% (87 out of 102), and 87% (89 out of 102) of survey respondents. Most respondents in each stakeholder group see facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment as 'very relevant' with the exception of end beneficiaries the majority of whom are divided between seeing the objective as 'moderately relevant' (41% (7 out of 17)), and 'very relevant' (47% (8 out of 17)).

National stakeholders consulted in the five countries for this case study (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), agree that the main objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation remain relevant and that their relevance will likely only increase in the context of recent social, economic and policy shifts. No differences between stakeholder groups are detected.

### The continuous relevance of specific 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions

Despite agreeing that the overall objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation remain very relevant, different groups of survey<sup>558</sup>, PC respondents,<sup>559</sup> stakeholders consulted in the five

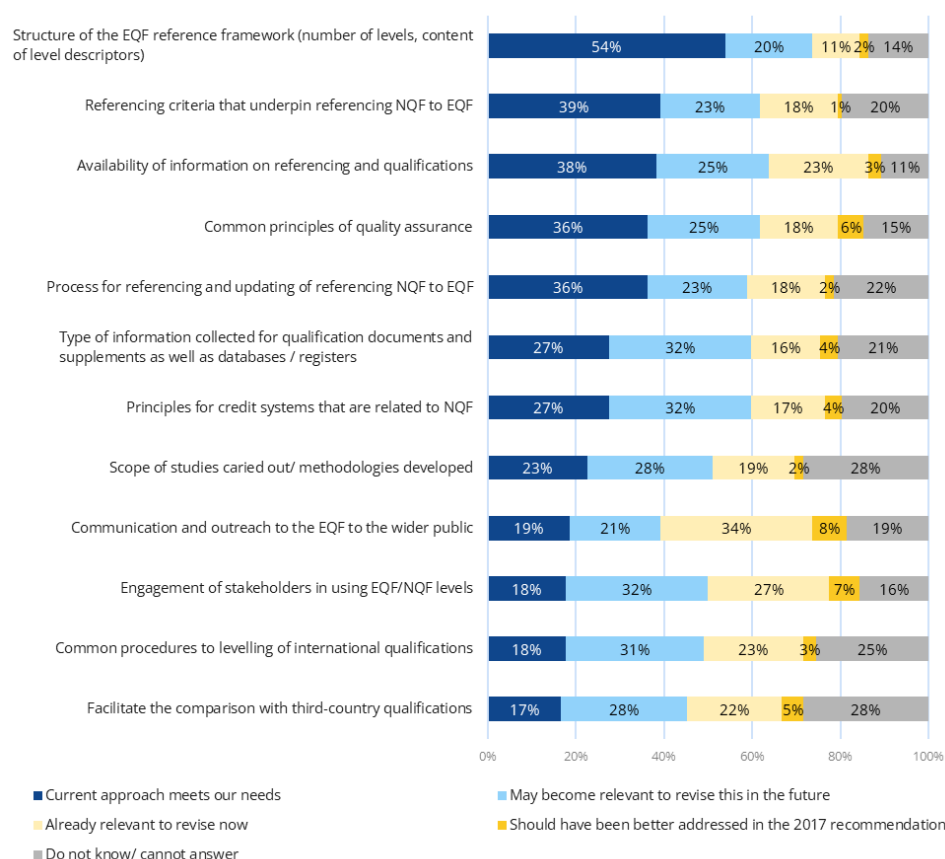
<sup>558</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include public authority or authority working with qualifications, end beneficiary representatives, and education and training providers.

<sup>559</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include holders of qualification(s), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients.

case study countries,<sup>560</sup> and interview respondents indicate that the implementation of some specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are currently not fully aligned with the challenges experienced by the EQF countries, and the needs of EQF stakeholders altered by recent social, economic, and policy developments.

Concerning the correspondence of specific 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions to the current needs of EQF stakeholders survey respondents' opinion seems to differ per provision.

**Figure 45. Please indicate for each of the following elements of the EQF Recommendation to what extent you expect that these should be revised in the future.**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey on the 2017 Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework, implemented between September 9 and October 24, 2022

Among the provisions the implementation of which seem relevant to adjust/strengthen immediately, the following can be mentioned: the communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public, engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels, common procedures to levelling international qualifications, availability of information on referencing and qualifications and facilitation of the comparison with third-country qualifications have the highest scores with regard to relevance to revise now, or “may become relevant to revise” in the future. Most of the remaining 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions, according to surveyed stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities), may need revisions in the future.

<sup>560</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries.

Stakeholders consulted in the five countries where country case studies were carried out (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries), and PC respondents agree that the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions on levelling of international qualifications, facilitating comparison with third-country qualifications, communication, and outreach of the EQF to wider public do not fully correspond to their current needs. In addition, they believe that implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions related to the structure of the EQF Referencing framework, common principles of quality assurance, type of information collected for qualification documents, supplements, and databases/registers should also be adjusted/strengthened.

Detailed assessment of which 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions currently do not fully correspond to EQF stakeholder needs, or will likely not fully correspond to the changing EQF stakeholder needs in the future and their suggested revisions are presented below.

#### Structure of the EQF reference framework (number of levels, content of level descriptors)

The majority of survey respondents (53% (55 out of 104)) indicate that the current structure of the EQF reference framework meets their needs. The current structure of the EQF reference framework seems to best fit the needs of the public authority representatives (59% (39 out of 66) respondents belonging to this stakeholder group believe that the current approach meets their needs). The opinions of the end beneficiaries and education and training providers seem to be more scattered. Less than half of end beneficiaries (41% (7 out of 17)), and education and training providers (36% (4 out of 11)) believe that the current structure of the EQF meets their needs, while others believe that it is relevant to revise it<sup>561</sup>. The current EQF reference framework seems to also fit the needs of stakeholders consulted in countries selected for the country case studies. No need for changes to the number of levels, or content of the level descriptors, was identified during the consultations.

Consulted **Lithuanian, Finnish, Romanian, and Swedish** stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), however, experience certain issues related to the practical application of the EQF reference framework. According to stakeholders consulted in the above-mentioned countries, there is not enough guidance on including and referencing micro-credentials to current EQF levels. The Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials<sup>562</sup> stresses that the EQF is open to all types and levels of qualifications and, therefore, is open to micro-credentials, if, and when, they are first included in national qualifications frameworks. This entails that referencing of micro-credentials is regarded as a national competence. Consulted Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly public authorities) report experiencing difficulties in the referencing process of micro-credentials, as they struggle to see a qualification as simply a sum of different learning parts. According to consulted **Lithuanian** stakeholders, a qualification encompasses the overall attitude, knowledge, capabilities, and worldview of a person and it is doubtful whether a simple sum of micro-credentials referenced to a certain EQF level allows to attain this. The currently insufficient guidance on the referencing of micro-credentials to EQF was also confirmed in interviews with international qualifications experts and by PC respondents.

**Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) further emphasise that currently the guidance on opening up their NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings is lacking. Up until 2023, 13 EQF countries have opened-up their NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings and the large majority (26) of the remaining EQF countries are currently working towards including qualifications awarded

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<sup>561</sup> Here and further this includes respondents selecting answers "Already relevant to revise now", "May become relevant to revise this in the future" and "Should have been better addressed in the 2017 recommendation"

<sup>562</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 10–25.

outside formal education and training. Further guidance and sharing of good practices could speed up the process of the opening of NQFs, and ensure better compatibility of approaches to this process taken in different countries.

As referencing of general education varies among countries, **Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) also express a lack of recommendations to what extent general education should be referenced to EQF, and whether the EQF level attained through general education programmes should be indicated on general education certificates. In Lithuania, changes in the general education started in 2019 to update the curricula and provide focus on the learning outcomes. During the process, learning outcomes of lower and upper secondary general education programmes were referenced, respectively, to LTQF levels 3 and 4. None of the qualification documents, however, provided in general education reference qualification frameworks as there is no clear link (other than the levels 3 and 4), between NQF and general education so far. According to the Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly public authorities), discussions on the topic have been organised but no clear decisions were made.

#### Process for referencing and updating of referencing NQF to EQF (including referencing criteria)

Around 40% of the survey respondents think that the implementation of the process for referencing and updating of referencing (44 out of 104 or 42%), as well as referencing criteria (43 out of 104 or 41%) should be revised. Consulted **Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) believe that the process for referencing and especially updating of referencing NQF to EQF would benefit from further encouragement by the European Commission as a lot of changes have already taken place in most countries, since the first referencing. Some survey respondents also expressed the need to start a more systematic dialogue between the European Commission and the EQF countries on updating the referencing reports. In addition, re-referencing was distinguished as an important focus area during the online validation workshop.

#### Common principles of quality assurance

Around half of the survey respondents (49% (51 out of 104)), mainly consisting of public authorities, believe that the uniform application of the common principles of quality assurance should be reinforced. The current approach to the common principles of quality assurance seem to best fit the needs of education and training providers (55% (six out of 11) of respondents believe that the current approach meets their needs). In other stakeholder groups, around a third of all respondents indicate that the current approach meets their needs.

From consultations with **Lithuanian** and **Swedish** stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), it appears that some practical quality assurance implementation issues are emerging. Lithuanian stakeholders raise the issue of quality assurance of online education and training, especially when delivered by private education and training providers. While trust in qualifications acquired through the conventional forms of learning, according to Lithuanian stakeholders, is more or less already ingrained, the emergence of new forms of learning raises questions about the quality of qualifications acquired through them. The quality of online courses, and the qualifications acquired through them can vary from country to country, and, as of now, the overall European approach to ensuring the quality of online learning seems to be lacking and the quality assurance principles outlined in the Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are not systematically applied for qualifications acquired through online learning.

Interview respondents representing international organisations (UNESCO) also point out that online learning brings a lot of new issues by enabling cross-border learning, which further raises questions which NQFs the outcomes of such learning should be referenced to and who should be responsible for assuring the quality of such learning.

**Swedish** stakeholders at the same time express concerns related to the quality assurance of non-formal learning. As most of the EQF countries have still not opened-up their NQFs to qualifications acquired outside formal learning (though a majority of countries are working towards this), the application of quality assurance principles to non-formal learning also vary across the EQF countries.

#### Principles for credit systems that are related to NQF

The majority of the survey respondents think that principles for credit systems that are related to NQF need to be revised. However, no specific indications on how the principles for credit systems could be revised were provided by the survey stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities). Current principles for credit systems that are related to NQF seem to best fit the education and training provider needs (45% (five out of 11) indicate that the current principles meet their needs). Stakeholders in case study countries (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), do not refer to the principles for credit systems that are related to NQF as requiring change.

#### Type of information collected for qualification documents and supplements as well as databases/registers

Around half of survey respondents (51% (53 out of 104)) believe that the type of information collected for qualification documents and supplements, as well as development of databases/registers is relevant to change. The type of information collected for qualification documents and supplements, as well as databases/registers seems to not meet the needs of end beneficiaries and those respondents under “Other” category. Only around a quarter (24% (four out of 17) respondents), of end beneficiaries and only one in 10 (10%) respondents under “Other” category believe that the type of information collected for qualification documents and supplements, or presented in databases/registers meets their needs.

**Romanian** and **Swedish** stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), note that the elaboration and quality of national registers differ significantly across EQF countries. For example, while Romanian stakeholders report having poor quality databases and the Swedish database is still under development, Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly public authorities) believe that their national database is quite elaborate.

In **Romania**, there are three registers of qualifications (HE, post-university programmes, and VET), however a project, ongoing since 2018, to merge HE and VET databases and registers has an expected outcome of one unique register for levels three to eight, named National Register for Qualifications (RNC). The register is due to be operational in June 2023. In **Sweden**, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (MYH) has been developing a qualifications database for the past few years and in September 2022, the Swedish NQF entered a new phase, and it is presently working on the further development of a qualification database. In **Lithuania**, a national register of study and training programmes was established back in 2010, and reorganised into a register of studies, training programmes and qualifications in 2015. The data published on the publicly available AIKOS portal meets Annex VI requirements to a large extent. These differences point to the further need of encouraging development and coordination among different national registers and databases.

The Europass platform is the official platform of the EQF, and currently serves as a tool for integrating and coordinating the information in the national registers. All Member States are invited to map their registers to Europass. Qualifications shared with Europass become searchable within the tool. The uptake of Europass, however, is still not sufficient. Currently, only 17 EU-27 MS and two non-EU countries out of 38 EQF countries transfer qualification information to Europass in line with Annex VI.

According to **Romanian** stakeholders (public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), the usefulness of national registers might increase if the 2017 EQF Recommendation would be revised to recommend connecting national registers with employer websites, increasing their interactivity and introducing new tools allowing for big data analysis and other methods that could be used to map and anticipate the accelerated transformations of jobs and occupations. Along the same lines, the creation of searchable databases (via ESCO<sup>563</sup>), or the provision of additional labour market information on qualifications (e.g. level and sector employment outcomes of achieved qualifications, via Eurostat), which are highly relevant to employers and jobseekers was suggested during the online validation workshop. International qualifications experts during the interviews further point out that greater interoperability of data among different national databases would allow to better match education and labour markets, and predict their future needs.

**Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) contributing to country case study noted that currently it is not clear how EQF countries should deal with information on qualifications which can no longer be acquired, but are still relevant due to individuals holding them. Whether this information should be presented in national databases remains an open question.

#### Availability of information on referencing and qualifications

Half of survey respondents (50% (52 out of 104)) believe that availability of information on referencing and qualifications should be improved. No significant differences between stakeholder groups are observed.

Stakeholders in countries where supporting case studies were carried out indicate that the availability of information on referencing and qualifications currently meets the needs of the frequent users of this information (e.g. public authorities, education and training providers). The key issue that remains is increasing the knowledge and usage of this information of the wider society (e.g. end beneficiaries).

#### Common procedures to levelling the international qualifications

Around half of survey respondents (54% (56 out of 104)) believe that the implementation of the common procedures to levelling of international qualifications should be strengthened. No significant differences between stakeholder groups are observed.

Based on the stakeholder consultations in **Romania** and **Portugal** (covering public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), levelling of international qualifications is one of the key 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions to be strengthened in the near future. The 2017 EQF Recommendation did not propose national level activities with regard to levelling of international qualifications, and instead focused on preparatory work at the European-level (through the EQF AG) on defining possible voluntary procedures to be put in place. Between 2017-2022 the work focused on defining possible voluntary procedures, and has not led to the adoption or establishment of concrete procedures that would permit more structured communication and consultation channels between EQF countries regarding the allocation of levels to international qualifications.

However, according to the stakeholders consulted in country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), more structured guidance on the level allocations of international qualifications is needed. Consulted national stakeholders would also see added value in the facilitation of the development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks, and the provision of guidance of their direct referencing to EQF. The need for facilitating levelling of

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563 European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations framework (ESCO)

international qualifications and development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks was also emphasised by PC respondents.

Some initiatives on developing international sectoral qualifications are already present among countries selected for country case studies. For example, in **Romania**, a pilot project on developing sectoral qualifications framework for air transport has been implemented by University Politehnica of Bucharest, financed under Erasmus+ project with universities, air transport training providers, and employers from five Member States (Romania, France, Croatia, Portugal, and Italy) participating. The result of the project was a report identifying and describing 30 qualifications relevant to the air transport sector. These were closely related to the EQF framework. Romanian stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), emphasise that many international qualifications are directly related to internationally regulated fields, such as maritime, air, partially road, and rail transport, and that, for these fields sectoral qualification frameworks, reflecting their particularities are currently not developed. Based on their pilot project experience, consulted Romanian stakeholders would appreciate further facilitation of the development of international sectoral qualification frameworks and guidance on their referencing to EQF.

### Facilitate the comparison with third-country qualifications

Most survey respondents (56% (58 out of 104)) indicate that facilitation of the comparison with third-country qualifications needs to be strengthened. No significant differences between stakeholder groups are observed.

There have been some significant developments in the work on criteria and procedures for comparing third-country frameworks since 2017 on the European-level with pilots in Ukraine, Cape Verde, the SADCQF<sup>564</sup>. More generally, the EQF as a whole has been influential in the development of other RQFs. For example, the CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF) was designed with reference to EQF to enhance comparability across different global education and training systems<sup>565</sup>. In addition, EU support and lessons learnt from the EQF experience also shaped the development of the AQRFS<sup>566567</sup>. Nevertheless, stakeholders in four out of five countries in the supporting country case studies (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), believe that further facilitation of third-country qualification framework comparisons is needed to meet their current needs. According to stakeholders, consulted in countries selected for country case studies, comparison with third-country qualifications became especially important since the start of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine when unprecedented numbers of displaced people fled. Based on this experience country stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), especially **Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities), would see a lot of added value in further referencing the qualifications of EU Southern and Eastern neighbourhood countries (which currently do not belong to the EQF), to the EQF.

Interview respondents (ETF, ERIC-NARIC representatives, EQF AG members, international qualifications experts), and PC respondents also believe that closer collaboration with non-EQF third countries in further development of the EQF might better correspond to current EQF stakeholder needs. Giving non-EQF third countries the right to reference to EQF, including countries which completed the comparison pilot process among

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<sup>564</sup> EQF AG 55-4, p. 3.

<sup>565</sup> Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat. The CARICOM Qualifications Framework: A model for enabling regional seamless human resource development. <https://caricom.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-CQF-for-Member-States.pdf>

<sup>566</sup>SHARE. 2015. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and National Qualifications Frameworks State of Play Report. <https://www.share-asean.eu/sites/default/files/2017-07-03-QF-study-final-for-SHARE-website.pdf>

<sup>567</sup> ETF (2020). Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020. [https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF\\_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020\\_EN.pdf](https://acqf.africa/resources/library/publications-from-international-sources/etf-regional-qualifications-frameworks-initiatives-around-the-globe-2020/@@display-file/file/ETF_RQF%20initiatives%20around%20the%20Globe%202020_EN.pdf)



EQF countries and in EQF AG, could be an option for this closer collaboration (as suggested by one of the interview respondents).

#### Scope of studies carried out/methodologies developed

Around half of survey respondents (49% (51 out of 104)), mainly consisting of public authorities, believe that it is relevant to revise the scope of studies carried out/methodologies developed. Though no requests for specific provisions are indicated.

Stakeholders in case study countries (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), do not refer to the element of the scope of studies carried out/methodologies developed as requiring revision.

#### Communication and outreach of the EQF to wider public (including engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels)

The majority of survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) believe that both engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels (67% (70 out of 104) of respondents), and the approach to communication and outreach of EQF to wider public (63% (65 out of 104) of respondents) are relevant to revise. The revision of the approach to communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public is seen as somewhat more urgent (34% (35 out of 104) of survey respondents believe it is already relevant to revise the implementation of this provision now) than the facilitation of changes in the engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels (28% (29 out of 104) of survey respondents believe that it is already relevant to revise the implementation of this provision now). No significant differences among stakeholder groups are observed.

In the five countries, where supporting case studies were carried out, engagement of stakeholders in using EQF/NQF levels differ. While in **Lithuania, Finland, Romania, and Portugal** NQF/EQF levels are generally used by the relevant stakeholders, in **Sweden** the use of NQF and EQF levels among the stakeholders is still not high. This is because the Swedish NQF database is still not fully operational and the planned areas of development and promotion on competence development and validation within the EQF/NQF are not yet regarded as a fully functioning framework by all stakeholders. Swedish stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), would like to see the NQF play a much more important role in the future than it does today. Except for HE providers, not many consulted stakeholders in Sweden are very familiar with the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Online validation workshop participants pointed out that further inclusion of stakeholders, such as career advisors, employees, and employers in using EQF/NQF levels is relevant for many EQF countries.

However, the communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public is seen as needing strengthening by all five country stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), as well as online validation workshop participants. **Lithuanian** stakeholders believe that better communication and outreach of the EQF could be attained by regular monitoring and evaluation of the use of information published in national databases, evaluating how often and by which groups the information is being accessed. Currently only some EQF countries collect data on the use of the databases and registers. Among the countries selected for this case study, neither **Lithuania**, nor **Romania, Sweden, or Portugal** regularly monitor the use of their databases. The Lithuanian AIKOS portal, where information on qualifications is publicly available, does not have a monitoring system. Interviewees mentioned that irregular user surveys were previously performed on the AIKOS website, but the response rate was rather low and implementing good quality surveys requires additional resources. The outreach could also be improved by ensuring that national central websites are established, providing all the key information in one place. For example, in **Romania** currently there are three different registers of qualifications (HE, post-university programmes, VET), the navigation of which is difficult for non-specialists. It is also important

to ensure that the information related to the EQF published in different websites and databases is consistent. **Finnish** stakeholders further add that currently the specific information needs of different EQF target groups (e.g. education and administration experts and general public), and the communication means most acceptable to them are not well understood.

**Romanian** and **Finnish** stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), point out that current communication on and the popularisation of the EQF is not systematic and not sufficiently structured or targeted to specific groups on both European- and national levels. More outreach to labour market actors is needed. **Finnish** stakeholders further add that currently communication concerning the EQF does not clearly outline what the EQF can, and cannot, be used for. Therefore, the expectations of different target groups around the usage of this tool are not well managed. This sentiment is also shared by PC respondents and online validation workshop participants.

Survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) confirm that currently EQF is not sufficiently accessible to the general public. PC respondents (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications), and online validation workshop participants also suggest continuing awareness raising about EQF/NQF to students, learners, employees, employers, education and training providers (e.g. through supporting EQF countries in communicating the practical value of the EQF to different target groups).

#### Other required changes to 2017 EQF Recommendation

Concerning other changes to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, not related to specific provisions, **Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities), contributing to the country case study singled out the need to complete and update the linking of ESCO to the EQF and increase their coherence. For example, some changes in the qualification descriptors that occurred after the adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation were not implemented in ESCO. The EQF, since 2017, describes qualifications in terms of: 1) Knowledge; 2) Skills; 3) Responsibility and autonomy (Annex II). The change of the third dimension is not reflected in ESCO. ESCO still focuses on: 1) Knowledge; 2) Skills; 3) Attitudes and values; 4) Language skills and knowledge. The need for closer linking of the EQF with other instruments, such as International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), ESCO, and Eurostat was also emphasised by PC stakeholders and online validation workshop participants.

Consulted **Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) also noted that currently both the EQF and ESCO are not flexible enough for the fast-changing labour market needs. Due to green and digital transitions and other factors, the need for new competences and qualifications in the workplace arises on a constant basis. However, for national stakeholders (e.g. Lithuanian stakeholders), it is not clear how these competences, qualifications and skills can be quickly included into ESCO and referenced to the EQF. Interviewed representatives of international organisations (ILO, ETF) and EQF AG members further add that fragmentation of the EQF and other related tools, such as ESCO, is counterproductive and better linkages are required. Furthermore, the flexibility of the EQF should be increased and the introduction of real time labour market information (e.g. by employing artificial intelligence tools), would be beneficial. The need for greater flexibility of the EQF was also emphasised by PC respondents.

According to **Lithuanian** and **Romanian** stakeholders (including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), the terminologies between the EQF and other related instruments, and information sources are not sufficiently aligned. Lithuanian stakeholders point out that the definition of competence differs in the EQF and ESCO, making it difficult to use these frameworks in

combination. While Romanian stakeholders notice that the terminology used by employers or training providers should be better aligned with EQF terminology.

**Lithuanian** stakeholders (mainly public authorities) further point out that Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation should be revised. Annex V currently refers to the principles for credit systems related to NQFs or systems referenced to the EQF and are fully compatible with both the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). Based on the Council Recommendation on VET<sup>568</sup> the concept of ECVET points was generally not applied and ECVET did not lead to the development of a European credit system in VET. Furthermore, after the adoption of the new Council Recommendation on VET<sup>569</sup> ECVET was discontinued. Therefore, it is no longer relevant to refer to ECVET in 2017 EQF Recommendation annexes.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

The case study dealt with the question to what extent the objectives and specific provisions of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant in the context of recent and future technological and broader EU policy developments. Altogether, the case study shows that the 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives remain very relevant in the light of recent social, economic and policy developments. Furthermore, their relevance is likely to increase in the future. In addition, there seems to be an agreement among the consulted stakeholders that no changes to the general structure and framework of the EQF are needed. However, concerning specific 2017 EQF Recommendation provisions some changes to their implementation is needed to ensure their better correspondence to the current EQF stakeholder needs.

Communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public (e.g. end beneficiaries) is one key provision, whereby the implementation of which is relevant to adjust. Stakeholders that contributed to the five complementary country case studies in Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden (covering public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, end beneficiaries), survey (mainly consisting of public authorities), PC (mainly consisting of someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) respondents, and online validation workshop participants all confirm that the approach to the communication of the EQF should be revised. To improve the awareness of the EQF among the wider public (e.g. end beneficiaries), better monitoring of the specific information needs (e.g. through the monitoring of the use of national databases/registers by different target groups), and adaptation of the communication means to different EQF target groups is needed. The communication also needs to be made more systematic and structured ensuring that the potential practical use, and limitations of EQF for each target group are clearly outlined in all communication activities. Further outreach to labour market actors (e.g. employers, employees and social partners) is also recommended.

Another provision the implementation of which is relevant to adjust concerns information collected for qualification documents, supplements, and development of databases/registers. The need to revise the implementation of this provision in order to better align it with current EQF stakeholder needs is confirmed by survey respondents, consulted country case study stakeholders, online validation workshop participants and European-level interview respondents. Taking into account the differences in elaboration of national databases/registers across different EQF countries, it is suggested to further

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<sup>568</sup> Council Recommendation (2020/C 417/01) of 24 November 2020 on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

<sup>569</sup> Council Recommendation (2020/C 417/01) of 24 November 2020 on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020H1202%2801%29#~:text=The%20Recommendation%20of%20the%20European%20Parliament%20and%20of,EU%20credit%20system%20in%20vocational%20education%20and%20training>

encourage the development of and coordination among different national registers and databases (e.g. by encouraging the uptake of Europass). Requests for encouraging integration of new interactive tools (e.g. linking EQF databases with ESCO, Eurostat), allowing for big data analysis and easier data search are also emerging among country case study stakeholders, online validation workshop participants, and interview respondents. Finally, country case study stakeholders noted that, currently, it is not clear how EQF countries should deal with information on qualifications, which can no longer be acquired, but are still relevant due to individuals holding them. It is important to provide guidance whether this information should be presented in national databases.

One more provision the implementation of which is relevant to strengthen concerns the levelling of international qualifications. The need to strengthen the implementation of this provision is confirmed by survey respondents, stakeholders consulted in countries where country case studies were implemented and PC respondents. According to stakeholders consulted in Romania and Portugal, more structured guidance on the level allocations of international qualifications is needed. It is also suggested to further facilitate the development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks and provide guidance of their direct referencing to EQF, which is currently not foreseen in the EQF Recommendation. The Romanian example of developing descriptions for 30 sectoral qualifications, relevant to the air transport sector under Erasmus+ project in five EQF countries, could be regarded as a good practice in this field.

The facilitation of the comparison with third-country qualifications is also seen as requiring strengthening to better correspond to the current EQF stakeholder needs by the survey, interview, PC respondents, online validation workshop participants, and stakeholders consulted in countries where country case studies were implemented. It is suggested to facilitate tighter collaboration with non-EQF third countries, especially those that have already completed the comparison pilot project and continue comparing the qualification frameworks of EU southern and eastern neighbourhood countries (that are currently not part of EQF), to EQF.

With regard to the EQF framework, no legal changes seem to be needed. However, consulted Lithuanian, Finnish, Romanian, and Swedish stakeholders emphasise the need for further guidance on referencing micro-credentials to the EQF. The need for such guidance was confirmed by survey, PC, and interview respondents. Consulted Lithuanian and Finnish stakeholders would also appreciate further guidance and sharing of good practices on opening up their NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings.

The application of common principles of quality assurance is suggested to be revised by survey and interview respondents, as well as stakeholders consulted in countries where country case studies were implemented. Consulted Lithuanian and Swedish stakeholders call for further facilitation of the systematic application of the quality assurance principles outlined in the Annex IV of the 2017 EQF Recommendation for qualifications acquired through online and non-formal learning across the EQF countries.

Among other changes, not related to specific EQF provisions, the need to complete and update the linking of ESCO to EQF, facilitating greater synergies among them and increasing the flexibility of both frameworks are suggested. It is also recommended to revise Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation as ECVET framework that it is referring to is no longer relevant.

## Annex 3. Summary table of the cost-benefit analysis

This annex presents a summary of the costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation for different stakeholders at local, national and EU levels as well as three EQF AG and National Coordination Points (NCPs). It must be noted that the existing sources provide limited evidence to assess the costs associated with running the NCPs and supporting the implementing of the EQF at national level. The 2017 EQF Recommendation implementation had costs at national and EU level.

Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
Direct and indirect compliance costs								
<b>Costs related to the implementation of the EQF at national level</b>								
Direct adjustment costs	NCP activities (communication, indication of EQF levels, activities related to EQF referencing)	Recurrent	Not applicable		Not applicable		Erasmus+ grant of EUR 20k-60k per year per EQF country, complemented by national co-financing of at least 25%. Total amount for the evaluation period 2018 to 2022: 7.3 million	The costs apply in principle to all EQF countries, but may be less substantial in countries that completed referencing before 2017. The grants are deemed as adequate by 36 out of 42 consulted NCPs and EQF AG members.
Direct adjustment costs	Referencing or updating of referencing of NQF to the EQF	One-off (per referencing or update)	Not applicable		Not applicable		Not available	The costs apply to 8 EQF countries that referenced or re(referenced) in the evaluation period. Interviewed NCP underline that the costs for referencing are substantial, due to the extensive involvement of national qualification authorities, broader stakeholders and experts.
Direct adjustment costs: labour and IT infrastructure	Development/set-up of a national register or database	One-off	Not applicable		Not applicable		Not available	No monetary estimates provided. The costs apply in principle to all EQF countries, though variety in how NQF are designed and communicated is large and no uniform approach can be identified across all EQF countries. A common cost among most counties initiated

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Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
								with the 2017 EQF Recommendation is related to developing and maintaining national qualification registers, which specify the links to NQF / EQF.
Indirect compliance cost to education and training providers	Costs for qualification providers to include qualifications outside formal education in the National Qualifications Framework	One-off (per qualification)	Not applicable		Relatively limited (EUR 1 000 – EUR 4 000 per qualification.	Not directly linked to the EQF, but to the NQF. Applicable in 13 countries	No costs	Costs are generally not incurred on providers of formal qualifications, which tended to be included in NQF at the time of establishing the national framework.
<b>Costs of implementation of the EQF at EU level</b>								
Adjustment costs	Erasmus+ funds to support EQF AG, EU communication activities, online tools and services, Europass platform  Direct labour costs of Commission staff.	Recurrent	Not applicable		Not applicable		Total amount for the evaluation period 2018-2022: EUR 2.3 M. On average, ca. EUR 0.2-0.7 million is available annually, further supported by an estimate 1 FTE staff time by European Commission officials.  In addition, 7.3 M was available for grants to NCPs, as presented in the first row of this table “NCP activities”	Erasmus+ work programmes provide an overview of the amounts allocated to support the implementation of the EQF. An overview of exact expenditure is difficult to provide, as in most cases EQF support activities are part of broader budget lines. Erasmus+ work programmes are used to approximate the costs. The suggested costs exclude the Erasmus+ support (up to EUR 1.4-1.5 million per year) for NCP already mentioned above.
Adjustment costs	Cedefop investments allocated for mobilisation of expertise	Recurrent	Not applicable		Not applicable		2.75 FTE and EUR 0.01 m in 2019 2.75 FTE and EUR 0.02 m in 2020 3.65 FTE and EUR 0.31 m in 2021	Cedefop staff provides expert support to the EQF AG as a whole and to individual EU Member States. It offers support to the organisation of AG meetings, provides technical

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Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
							4 FTE and EUR 0.35 m in 2022	inputs in preparation and during AG meetings and project group meetings, as well as contributing to the development of EQF guidance material. It also supported together with the European Commission the organisation of peer learning events in the context of the AG.
Adjustment costs	ETF investments in work on qualifications	Recurrent	Not applicable		Not applicable		Not available: on average 5 staff members work in the field of qualifications, no FTE estimate available	The ETF also provides its expertise to the AG with a focus on EQF countries outside the EU. In the most recent assessment of its work on qualifications, an estimated five staff members were working in the field of qualifications with partner countries. This estimate does not explicitly distinguish between support for the AG and support directly to partner countries. Based on the evaluation of its work on qualifications for the period 2014-2019, this can be estimated to represent the larger share.
<b>Direct benefits</b>								
<b>Benefits related to the implementation of the EQF at national level</b>								
Improved market efficiency	Benefits NCP activities related to the EQF	Recurrent	Not available	Having single point of contact with expertise on EQF / NQF	Not available	Having single point of contact with expertise on EQF / NQF	Not available	NCP are a crucial prerequisite for effectively organising qualification frameworks at the national level, serving as single point of coordination for other national stakeholders, and bringing together all expertise on relevant developments in other EQF countries. The costs in relation to key activities of

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
								NCP are limited and proportionate to the benefits of having NCPs (based on findings from the case study).
Improved welfare	Benefits related to the (updated) referencing of NQF to the EQF	Recurrent	Not available	Transparent information available on referencing NQF	Not available	Transparent information available on referencing NQF	Not available	The extensive work around referencing has the benefit of increasing the quality of the report and as such contribute to the transparency of the process at a European level.
Improved welfare	Example: Increased availability and accessibility of information about qualifications and their relation to qualifications from other sectors and countries	Recurrent	Not available	Access to education or training or recognition of qualification by employer	Not available	More comparative insights in qualifications held by employees / candidates	Not available	Significant increases in the transparency and comparability of national qualifications systems. Beyond national borders, these registers also allow comparisons with other European qualifications in similar registers and are being connected on the Europass platform. This opens up such gains in transparency and comparability. This work is found to yield substantial benefits that clearly outweigh their costs.



## Annex 4. Synopsis report covering all stakeholder consultations

The synopsis report summarises the consultation activities, methods and findings of the consultation task of the study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017 EQF Recommendation).

### Overview of consultation activities

The purpose of the consultation activities was to gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, such as Member States authorities, qualification authorities, education and training providers, social partners, civil society organisations and the general public. To adequately reach them, these were consulted via a wide range of consultation activities with a different scope and focus, in particular:

- PC and call for evidence
- Targeted consultation:
  - Exploratory interviews
  - Interviews about EU level policies
  - Targeted online survey
  - Interviews with stakeholders at national level as part of case studies
  - Validation workshop

These consultation activities provided insights to answer different evaluation questions (concerning effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, and relevance) by gathering stakeholder views about the implementation, effects, coherence, and relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation as a whole and its different provisions.

Consultation activities were promoted directly to the identified stakeholders, via dissemination channels of relevant stakeholders, existing policy networks and expert groups, as well as on social media (LinkedIn, Twitter).

### Information on consultation activities and stakeholders consulted

Table 29 provides an overview of stakeholders consulted and consultation activities applied. Each consultation activity is then discussed in more detail.

**Table 29. Overview of stakeholders consulted through the different consultation activities**

	Public consultation and call for evidence	Exploratory interviews	Interviews	Targeted online survey	Case study interviews	Validation workshop
DG EMPL, Cedefop, and ETF representatives		X	X			X
EQF AG national representatives	X	X	X	X	X	X
EQF AG social partners	X			X		X

	Public consultation and call for evidence	Exploratory interviews	Interviews	Targeted online survey	Case study interviews	Validation workshop
EQF NCPs	X		X	X	X	X
ENIC-NARIC	X		X			
International qualifications experts	X		X			X
Third country representatives	X		X			
Public authorities	X			X	X	
End beneficiary representatives (i.e. learners, graduates, jobseekers, workers)	X			X	X	
Education and training providers	X			X	X	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Public consultation and call for evidence

The objective of the **PC** was to gather opinions from all stakeholders, in particular those less directly involved in the EQF implementation process and/or active users of the EQF and gain additional insights on the situation overall and in different countries. The PC was launched on December 14 and was open until March 22, 2023. In total 267 responses were received. The table provides details about respondents' type, type of county, organisation type and size.

**Table 30. Overview of stakeholders consulted during the public consultation**

Stakeholder group	Number of responses
<b>Type of respondent</b>	
EU citizen	73 (27%)
Public authority	65 (24%)
Academic/research institution	44 (16%)
Company/business organisation	12 (4%)
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)	12 (4%)
Non-EU citizen	12 (4%)
Business association	11 (4%)
Trade union	8 (3%)
Other	30 (11%)
<b>Type of respondents</b>	
Holders of qualification(s) (i.e. learners, graduates, jobseekers, workers)	59 (22%)
Designers / providers of programmes that lead to qualifications	37 (14%)
Designers of qualifications	14 (5%)
Someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications	61 (23%)
Someone using/ consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients, etc.	39 (15%)
Other <sup>570</sup>	57 (21%)
<b>Respondent country group</b>	
EU countries	215 (81%)
Non-EU EQF countries	25 (9%)
Non-EQF countries	27 (10%)
<b>Respondent country group by time of referencing 1</b>	
Countries that referenced their qualification framework or system to EQF by the end of 2017	166 (76%)
Countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2017	53 (24%)
<b>Respondent country group by time of referencing 2</b>	

<sup>570</sup> Other category includes: Ministries representatives, EUA members, academics and researchers, representatives of SMEs organisations, qualified observers, EC employees, designers of qualifications and of programmes that lead to qualifications, Erasmus+ National Agency, the national authorities for QF development, education officers, Civil Society Network member of EQF advisory board, policy makers, mobility coordinators, experts (chamber, VET, Higher education, society and human rights, adult needs, healthcare), trade unions, NEC coordinators.

Stakeholder group	Number of responses
Countries that referenced their qualification framework or system to EQF by the end of 2012	97 (44%)
Countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2012	122 (56%)
<b>Size of the country</b>	
Small (population up to 10m)	106 (44%)
Medium (population between 10-30 m)	69 (29%)
Large (population larger than 30m)	65 (27%)

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023

17 responses were received to the **call for evidence** (15 through 'Have your say' platform and two ad hoc via email). National authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), business associations and businesses, as well as citizens from ten EU countries<sup>571</sup> responded to the call for evidence.

## Exploratory interviews

The objective of the **exploratory interviews** was to fine-tune the evaluation questions, indicators, and judgement criteria, to identify key stakeholders relevant for the EQF, to inform the design of the questionnaires for the survey and PC, and to identify key themes and trends for the case studies. Eight interviews were carried out between June 9-16, 2022: two with DG EMPL, one with ETF, one with Cedefop, and four with EQF AG representatives.

## Interviews about EU level policies

The objective of the **interviews** was to explore European-level reflections on the evaluation criteria in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Interviews focused exclusively on the EU/international level and served to explore EQF development at the EU level more in-depth (including governance, coherence, value added). In addition, the interviews provided insights from EQF AG members and EQF NCPs on the national situation in selected countries. These interviews also targeted the gaps remaining after mapping and desk research. In total 21 interviews were carried out between January 11 and February 21, 2023. The stakeholders interviewed are listed in Table 31 below.

**Table 31. Overview of stakeholders consulted during the interviews**

Stakeholder (no of interviews)	Countries covered	Logic for selecting stakeholders
EQF AG members (6)	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Norway, Kosovo <sup>572</sup>	Respondents who did not complete the survey aiming to ensure better overall country coverage and in order not to target the same stakeholders multiple times and to avoid overburdening them.
EQF NCPs (2)	Czechia, Hungary	
ENIC-NARIC (4)	Malta, Netherlands, France, Romania	Respondents from the countries that were among top 10 destination countries in 2019 ENIC-NARIC report <sup>573</sup> were selected, as they should have the most experience with recognition of qualifications from other countries.
International qualifications experts (4)	Not relevant	Selected authors of relevant publications analysed during the study were selected.
Third country representatives (4)	Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Philippines <sup>574</sup>	Representatives of third countries that cooperated with EQF were selected.
ETF representatives (1)	Not relevant	-

<sup>571</sup> Austria; Belgium; Denmark; France; Germany; Italy; Netherlands; Slovakia; Spain; Sweden.

<sup>572</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

<sup>573</sup> [ENIC Network and NARIC Network \(2019\). Report on the global dimension of the ENIC and NARIC Networks. https://rm.coe.int/item-11-b-report-on-the-global-dimension-of-the-enic-naric-pd/1680967128](https://rm.coe.int/item-11-b-report-on-the-global-dimension-of-the-enic-naric-pd/1680967128)

<sup>574</sup> All cooperated (had or are set to have pilots) with EQF. The Philippines is part of ASEAN which does cooperate with EQF.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

## Targeted online survey

The objective of the **survey** was to gather experiences, opinions, and suggestions about the 2017 EQF Recommendation from stakeholders who are directly involved in the EQF implementation and/ or benefiting from it. The survey was open for responses between September 9 and October 24, 2022. The survey was distributed through two channels:

- EQF AG members and NCPs of each EQF country were invited to participate in the survey directly via email and to share it through their professional networks.
- Stakeholders involved or mentioned in all EQF referencing reports were mapped, collecting their contact details on the web and inviting them to the survey directly via email.

In total the survey received 122 responses, of which 102 were complete and 20 were partial. The table below provides details about respondents' type, education sector of respondent, country size, and country groups (EU vs non-EU, groups by date of reference to EQF).

**Table 32. Overview of stakeholders consulted during targeted online survey**

Stakeholder group	Number of responses
<b>Type of respondents</b>	
Public authority or authority working with qualifications	79 (65%)
End beneficiary representatives	22 (18%)
Education and training providers	13 (11%)
Other <sup>575</sup>	10 (8%)
<b>Respondent country group</b>	
EU countries	92 (82%)
Non-EU EQF countries	20 (18%)
<b>Respondent country group by time of referencing 1</b>	
Countries that referenced their qualification framework or system to EQF by the end of 2017	82 (76%)
Countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2017	26 (24%)
<b>Respondent country group by time of referencing 1</b>	
Countries that referenced their qualification framework or system to EQF by the end of 2012	55 (51%)
Countries that have not referenced their qualifications to EQF by 2012	53 (49%)
<b>Size of the country</b>	
Small (population up to 10m)	26 (23%)
Medium (population between 10-30 m)	62 (55%)
Large (population larger than 30m)	24 (21%)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Consultations with national level stakeholders as part of case studies

**Consultations with national level stakeholders** were carried as part of the case studies and were implemented by national experts as interviews and group interviews. The objective of these consultations was to collect stakeholders' inputs, positions, and opinions on selected case study topics. Stakeholders with specific knowledge on the selected case study topics were targeted for these consultations. In total 131 people were consulted between October 14, 2022 and January 8, 2023. The table below provides details about the number of stakeholders consulted per country and type of respondent.

<sup>575</sup> Other category includes: not for profit organisations, research institutions, freelancers, experts, counsellors, national Europass Centre, national council for development of human potential.

**Table 33. Overview of stakeholders targeted during case studies**

Stakeholders Data		Total	Countries														
			CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT	RO	RS	SE	SI
Number of stakeholders		131	7	5	10	7	6	5	13	8	6	9	2	15	15	8	5
Type	Public Authority	20	1	3	1	1	0	1	0	6	2	0	0	1	0	1	3
	Authority working with qualifications	44	5	2	3	3	2	4	6	2	5	4	1	4	0	3	0
	Education and training provider	41	1	0	2	1	4	0	6	0	6	3	0	4	9	3	2
	End beneficiary representative	20	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	6	6	1	0
	Other	6	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Interviewee vs. group interview	Interviewee	99	7	5	10	7	2	5	13	8	1	6	1	6	5	8	5
	Group interviews	31	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	5	3	0	9	10	0	0

Notes: Only two stakeholders were consulted during consultations in Portugal. This is because the case study mainly focused on factual information (e.g. databases, credit systems), which means that the insights gained from the respondent responsible for this are sufficient. The central reforms discussed date back to 2007, with only minor changes over 5 years ago, thus it would be difficult to probe reflections on the system from other stakeholders (employers/ unions).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## Validation workshop

An online **validation workshop** was organised on April 17, 2023. The workshop aimed to present and validate the findings of the study and to discuss study lessons learnt as well as future perspective of the EQF with key EQF stakeholders. The validation workshop brought together 25 representatives of EU and national level stakeholders and experts on qualifications. Workshop participants included EU-level agencies and associations (five), national level public authorities representing relevant ministries (six), national agencies for (higher vocational) education and academic information centres (three), national qualification authorities (three), EQF AG members and NCPs (three), and DG EMPL representatives (five). Representatives from 11 EU (Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden) and two non-EU (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine) countries, participated in the workshop. This variety of participants allowed to capture views from different stakeholders and countries and thus provide robust insights for the study.

## Methodology for data processing

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to analyse the results of the **PC** and **survey**. The quantitative data analysis encompassed an examination of the frequency distribution for each answer option in the closed-ended questions, as well as cross-tabulations between respondents' characteristics. For the qualitative data analysis, open answers were analysed to identify additional information and trends. Partial responses were analysed together with complete responses. As a result, the number of responses differs in each question. Only responses where at least one question was answered from the main part of the questionnaire were considered as partial and analysed. In order to avoid situations where a partial response was submitted by respondent who also provided full response, using Alchemer™ tool we checked if only one response from the same device was submitted. There were no instances when a partial and complete response was submitted from the same device, thus all partial responses can be considered as valid unique responses.

For the **(exploratory) interviews**, the write-ups from the interviews were prepared, answers were broken down by the different questions and analysed through a qualitative analysis to identify common trends and relevant insights.

For the **consultations with national level stakeholders** selected country experts were responsible for gathering data at national level through desk research, interviews and/ or group interviews. Country experts were provided with specific templates to guide the (group) interviews in their country, on which they were asked to report. Related to the topics and the evaluation questions, the country experts were asked to tailor the questions and sub-questions to their national context and the stakeholder groups and to provide a checklist of questions to the interviewees in the national language prior to the interview/group interview. The findings, as reported by the country experts, were then analysed by the core team, who brought all inputs together in a synthetic description of each of the ten themes.

For **validation workshop** the outcomes of the discussions were collected in workshop report and informed the whole analysis, especially the part on lessons learnt.

## Findings from consultation activities

### Effectiveness

This section considers findings on the contribution of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to achieving the EQF specific and wider objectives, the implementation of its key provisions, communication efforts around the EQF and the EQF contribution to easing the integration of migrants.

## Contribution of the 2017 EQF Recommendation to achieving the EQF objectives

### Specific objective: Improved transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications

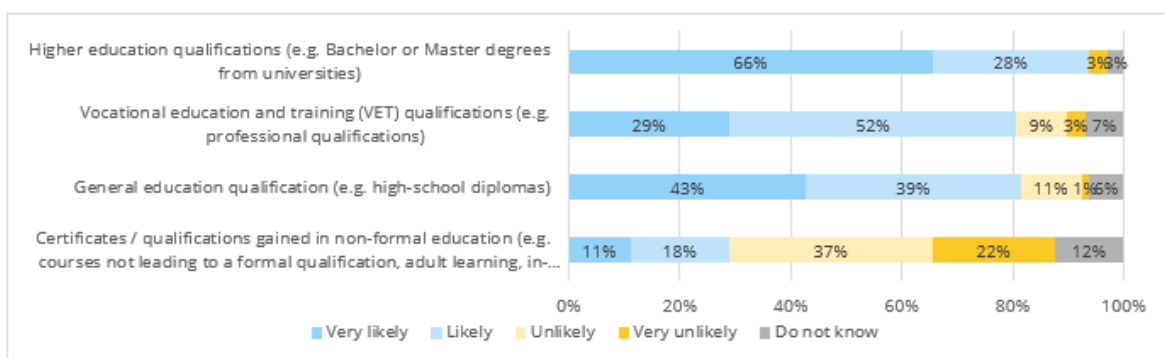
Improvements in the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications, both within and between countries, were reported by different stakeholder groups across all consultation activities. The following specific effects were identified:

- Increased understanding of qualifications. A large majority of survey and PC respondents agreed that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation improved comparability and transparency and contributed to an increased understanding of qualifications from other countries (101 out of 121 or 83% of survey respondents and 195 out of 229 or 85% of PC respondents agreed or strongly agreed to this statement), with no differences between stakeholder groups and their level of involvement in the EQF. Moreover, five respondents (mostly NGOs) to the call for evidence also expressed support for the EQF as a necessary instrument to support the transparency, comparability and compatibility portability of qualifications, providing an overarching framework and a common language for qualifications in Europe.
- The country-level consultations in the case studies provided a slightly more nuanced picture, with differences between countries in the extent to which beneficial changes were observed on transparency and comparability due to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. For example, in Germany and Ireland only limited impacts were seen, while in Spain and France, the 2017 EQF Recommendation was seen as a key reference point for improving comparability, transparency, and building trust. Such differences between countries are best understood by whether between 2017

and 2022 a reform or revision of the qualifications framework took place. Where this is not the case, the 2017 EQF Recommendation is expected to be less visible among stakeholders.

- Stakeholders consulted also provided concrete examples of the EQF increasing their understanding of qualifications. Around half (130 out of 229 or 57%) of the PC respondents (mostly someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications) indicated that in the last five years, they used the EQF to better understand another country's qualification system as a whole. 45 out of 58 (78%) EQF AG members who responded to the survey stated that being involved in the EQF AG substantially or somewhat increased their understanding of other qualification systems. Four interviewed stakeholders (EQF AG member, NCP, ENIC-NARIC and third country representative) also referred to higher levels of trust between countries and knowledge about other country qualification systems as a result of the EQF.
- Improved recognition of qualifications. The vast majority of PC respondents (citizens, national and local authorities) thought that it is likely or very likely for qualifications from formal education to be recognised by education and training providers and employers in another EQF country (see Figure 46 and Figure 47 below). Respondents to the PC576 also provided anecdotal examples of how the EQF facilitated the comparison of (academic) qualifications, for instance by offering learners a better understanding of entry requirements of programmes and providing a framework for assessing the level of qualifications in recognition. In addition, twelve interviewed stakeholders (ETF, EQF AG members, international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, third country representatives) reported that the EQF contributed to easier understanding of learning pathways and easier recognition of the level of qualifications acquired abroad. However, respondents of the PC (citizens, national and local authorities) expressed doubts about the recognition of qualifications gained in non-formal education, with 85 or 59% considering this as unlikely or very unlikely.
- Better cooperation between education and training sectors. Two interviewed international qualifications experts reported that the EQF contributed to better cooperation between education and training sectors.

**Figure 46. In your opinion, how likely is it for qualifications obtained in your country to be recognised by education and training providers in other EQF countries?**

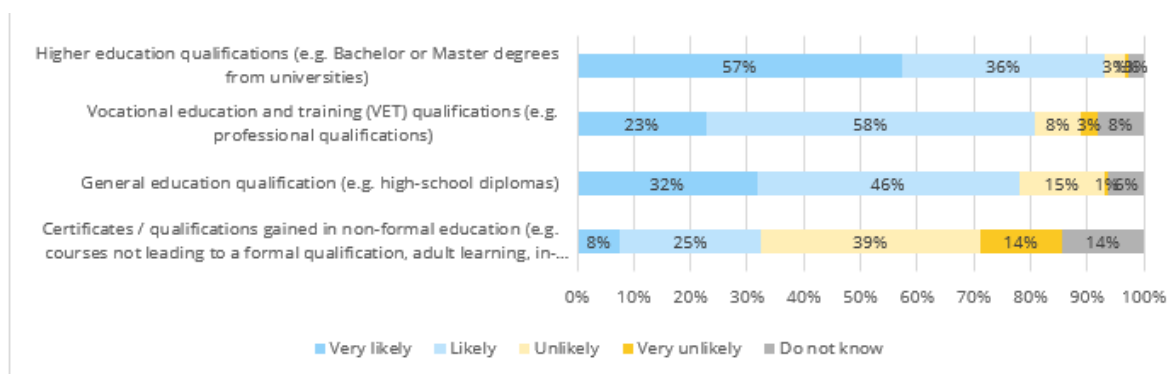


Note: Total (N)=145. Question was answered by citizens, local and national organisations.

Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023.

<sup>576</sup> Groups of stakeholders consulted include holders of qualification(s), designers/providers of programmes that lead to qualifications, designers of qualifications, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications, someone using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients.

**Figure 47. In your opinion, how likely is it for qualifications obtained in one country to be understood and accepted by employers in other EQF countries?**



Note: Total (N)=145. Question was answered by citizens, local and national organisations.  
Source: own elaboration based on EQF Public Consultations, 2023.

### Specific objective: Facilitating lifelong learning

There is consensus among different stakeholder groups responding to the survey (81 out of 116 or 70%) and the PC (123 out of 229 or 54%) about the **importance of the EQF for improving conditions for lifelong learning** as they agreed or strongly agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation supported flexible learning and contributed to improving conditions for lifelong learning. Respondents to the survey also pointed to examples of how the EQF supports lifelong learning:

- growth in the use of lifelong learning activities;
- more transparency in the market of lifelong learning;
- special accreditation of skills and recognition of non-formal training and work experience.

Consultations with a wider group of national stakeholders, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, during the case studies showed that **the effect of the EQF differs across countries**: lifelong learning developments in some countries with less mature qualifications frameworks (Poland, Serbia) are associated with the 2017 EQF Recommendation, while in other countries with more mature frameworks (France, the Netherlands, Ireland and to some extent Czechia) this is not the case. Countries with more mature framework see improvements linked more strongly to internal national developments and suggested that the NQF is not considered driving lifelong learning policies but are seen as additional support tools that are integrated in wider lifelong learning reforms. While countries with frameworks in development point to the influence of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in inspiring further developments.

### Wider objective: Modernising education and training systems

National stakeholders interviewed in four out of five specific case study countries (Germany, Finland, France, Serbia), including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, agreed that the 2017 **EQF Recommendation informed the debates about education and training systems**. This is further substantiated by results from the PC as the large majority of respondents regardless of country and stakeholder group (189 out of 229 or 83%) agreed or strongly agreed that European cooperation in the framework of the EQF was one of the factors that has inspired education and training reforms in their countries.



## Wider objective: Employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers

In the survey and PC, around half of respondents from different countries and stakeholder groups agreed or strongly agreed that **European cooperation in the framework of the EQF has increased**:

- mobility of workers and learners (71 out of 122 or 58% in the survey and 100-134 out of 229 or 44-59%<sup>577</sup> in PC);
- employability of workers and learners (57 out of 122 or 46% in the survey and 141 out of 229 or 62% in PC).
- social integration of workers and learners (41 out of 122 or 34% in the survey and 103 of 229 or 45% in PC).

A substantial share of respondents could not answer this question<sup>578</sup> This could be explained with the difficulty to draw a direct causal link to the EQF. At the same time, anecdotal evidence from stakeholders consulted during four country case studies (Germany, Finland, Serbia, France), including public authorities, authorities working with qualifications, education and training providers, and end beneficiaries offer some examples of possible links between the EQF and mobility of learners and workers whereby reforms triggered by the 2008, and to some extent the 2017 EQF Recommendation, facilitated mobility. These reforms included the generalisation of learning outcomes-oriented standards, the introduction of new qualification types, and more flexible learning pathways through modularisation and validation mechanisms. Broader and indirect impacts were also noted such as improvements of (youth) employability and creating flexible and individualised learning paths or policies that can impact the employability, mobility and social integration of learners and workers. However, the country case studies highlighted that these reforms were shaped by national priorities and mostly facilitated mobility, while the impact on employability and social integration was more difficult to identify. Nevertheless, country case studies did provide anecdotal examples of where national developments inspired by the 2017 EQF Recommendation can be observed.

From all PC respondents, 11 (who work with qualifications<sup>579</sup>) **expressed doubts about the impacts that the 2017 EQF Recommendation** can have on the employability, mobility and social integration of learners and workers. They believed **other factors**, such as personal motivation, economic situation or employment policy as more important. In addition, respondents mentioned the **limited awareness and use** of the EQF/NQF among employers and learners as a factor that restricts the possible impact the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

## Effectiveness of implementing key provisions of the Recommendation addressed to Member States

The majority of **survey respondents**, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, (79 out of 120 or 66%) **agreed or strongly agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation has been adequately implemented in respondents'**

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<sup>577</sup> This was covered by three survey statements: ... has increased the number of individuals who crossed my country's borders for work and/or study (in- and outgoing) (58% (strongly) agreed); ... has increased the number of individuals in my country moving between jobs / sectors (44% (strongly) agreed); ... has increased the number of learners who move between different types and levels of education in my country (59% (strongly) agreed).

<sup>578</sup> Survey: up to 41%; PC: up to 34%.

<sup>579</sup> This includes respondents ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications; designer/provider of programmes that lead to qualifications; respondents using/consulting qualifications to assess candidates, learners, clients, etc.

**countries.** When the same question was asked about the implementation of the EQF 2017 Recommendation in other countries, most of the respondents did not know or could not answer (70 out of 120 or 58%), indicating that awareness about developments in other countries is limited.

### Strengthening implementation of the EQF through referencing

Interviews with national stakeholders, representing public authorities, from Germany (five respondents) and Slovenia (five respondents)<sup>580</sup> pointed at **beneficial effects of the referencing in their national context:**

- Increased focus on learning outcomes and a paradigm shift in curriculum design, with a greater emphasis on outcomes rather than input-based education.
- Building consensus on the equivalence of VET and HE qualifications.
- Improved comparability of qualifications at national and international level.
- Improved access to information about qualifications at national level.

The majority of surveyed EQF AG members (24 out of 33 or 74%) rated the current referencing criteria as fully adequate to ensure transparency, trust and cooperation among countries. At the same time, interviewed EQF AG members indicated **challenges** hindering the referencing process: **limited transparency in the levelling methods** and **insufficient trust in levelled qualifications, inconsistent descriptions** of qualifications, **incomplete or outdated NQFs**, and **limited visibility** of NQF/EQF.

### Strengthening implementation of the EQF through re-referencing

Survey respondents either **agreed or strongly agreed** (68 out of 118 or 58%, mainly public authorities) or **were not able to answer** (39 out of 118 or 33%) if **outdated referencing in some countries poses a risk to the functioning of the EQF**. The views **on the necessity of objective criteria to determine the need for updating referencing are divergent**. Respondents of the **survey** that were involved in referencing indicated that updating should be done when the structure, levels or level descriptors in the NQF change (17 out of 33 or 52%), when the scope of the NQF changes (16 out of 33 or 48%), or whenever the country deems it relevant (16 out of 33 or 48%).

Interviewed EQF AG members from countries that completed re-referencing (France, Netherlands, Ireland) indicated that the **update of the referencing report increased international comparability and transparency and stimulated national level reflections on the NQF**. In particular, the update led to a critical reflection on the NQF from a European perspective and to alignment of the NQF to the changing national context. For example, the referencing criteria and feedback process in France contributed to improving the national system and made implicit characteristics of the French system explicit.

### Encouraging links between formal, non-formal and informal learning

Survey and PC respondents (mainly public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) agreed that the 2017 EQF

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<sup>580</sup> Both countries referenced their NQFs to EQF before the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Recommendation supports flexible learning (see section on *Specific objective: Facilitating lifelong learning* above).

There are **divergent views on the role of the 2017 EQF Recommendation in increasing the comprehensiveness of national frameworks and systems**. Whilst interviewed national stakeholders (including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries) from Poland and Serbia indicate that the 2017 EQF Recommendation kept the momentum for operationalising their NQFs, those from France, Ireland and the Netherlands attributed developments to ongoing reforms prompted by national developments, and not directly to the 2017 EQF Recommendation. This could be linked to the maturity of NQFs in these countries. Countries with more mature NQFs tend to have high level of autonomous developments in increased comprehensiveness of NQF and do not attribute these developments to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

## Linking common provisions on quality to qualifications

**Stakeholders consulted** (mainly public authorities) **are generally optimistic about the role of the EQF in quality assurance and also recognise the role of NQFs as a quality label, although the 2017 EQF Recommendation did not lead to further follow-up at the European or national level to formulate additional activities**. The survey results showed that out of 104 respondents (mainly public authorities), 69 (67%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the EQF recommendation 3 and Annex IV<sup>581</sup> have strengthened links between Quality Assurance (QA) systems and NQFs. This ratio remains approximately the same across respondent groups. However, national stakeholders consulted as part of case studies in Slovenia, Germany and the Netherlands, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, do not assign QA developments to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as these mostly occurred before the publication of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and were already aligned with established Europe-wide QA standards, such as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and European Quality Assurance in Vocation Education and Training (EQAVET), to which the 2017 EQF QA approach is also aligned.

## Linking common provisions on credit systems to qualifications

Around half of the survey respondents (58 out of 104 or 56%), of which mostly public authorities (41 or 58%) from countries that have referenced by 2017 (36 or 48%) think that the 2017 EQF Recommendation on Annex V<sup>582</sup> **contributed to increased opportunities** for the transfer of learning outcomes across different education sectors through credit systems. National experts consulted in Ireland, France, and Portugal, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, identified an overlap between national approaches to credit systems in general and the principles outlined in Annex V. They also indicated that the 2017 EQF Recommendation **did not trigger reforms in credit systems as many countries have already established such links**, meaning that only marginal changes since 2017 could have been observed.

## Communication efforts around the EQF

The vast majority of survey respondents from all stakeholder groups agreed or strongly agreed that **awareness among end beneficiaries is necessary for the EQF to function properly**, in particular on the EQF's purpose (100 of 118 or 85%), on the NQF structure (105 of 118 or 89%) and on how to compare national qualification across countries (100 of 118 or 85%). Survey results also show **increase in communication efforts**, as around half

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<sup>581</sup> Annex providing principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

<sup>582</sup> Annex providing principles for credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

(60 of 105 or 57%) of the respondents reported that national communication efforts since 2017 have increased awareness of the EQF among relevant stakeholders (with bigger focus on NQF developers and implementers). The share of public authorities and education and training providers who agreed to this statement is higher compared to end beneficiaries who provided an answer. In addition, 42 of 105 or 40% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that EU communication efforts since 2017 have increased awareness among stakeholders. While the majority of PC respondents (229 of 267 or 85%) were aware or slightly aware of the EQF, interviews with different national stakeholders as part of case studies in Czechia, the Netherlands, and Romania, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, found that despite various communication efforts, **the level of awareness of the EQF among the general public is low, but more satisfactory among experts using the EQF.**

### **EQF contribution to easing the integration of migrants**

Looking at the **possible direct impact of the EQF** as a tool supporting the integration of migrants, interviewed international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, ETF and third country representatives mentioned that the **recognition work** undertaken at ENIC-NARIC centres **relies to some extent on the EQF as a tool** and contributes to more consistent recognition of qualifications, although this is considered most **useful when third countries have NQFs or systems which have similarities with the EQF**. However, according to consultations with national stakeholders, mainly public authorities and education and training providers, in Germany, Spain, Poland, Serbia, and Sweden, the national context of EQF countries, including relevant migration policies and legislation, labour market forces, and dominant migrant populations, are most impactful to the integration of migrant learners and workers.

Beyond support to recognition at the individual level, the EQF could have an **indirect impact fostering exchange and cooperation bringing EQF and non-EQF framework systems closer together.**

Seven interviewed stakeholders (international qualifications experts, ENIC-NARIC, third country representatives) noticed that **EQF activities ought to contribute to a better understanding of third country qualification frameworks**. For example, one interviewed ENIC-NARIC stakeholder mentioned that activities related to the EQF-African Continent Qualification Framework (ACQF) comparison (e.g. webinars, information sharing, and events) led to a valuable **exchange of knowledge, experience, and lessons learned**. In addition, survey results indicate that 61 out of 111 (55%) respondents are aware of EQF work on comparison pilots (of which, 42 or 69% are public authorities, 9 or 15% are end beneficiaries and 3 or 5% are education and training providers). Of those that are aware, around half (35 or 57% respondents) agreed that **comparison pilots increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications awarded by non-EQF countries**. However, stakeholders consulted in the case studies felt they had **little exposure to EQF developments** and could not identify any impact of the EQF on the understanding of third country qualifications (e.g. public authorities, education and training providers, and social partners in Serbia and Sweden), or perceived it to be too soon to assess the influence of the EQF (e.g. public authorities, education and training providers, and social partners in Spain and Poland) in light of their national context (e.g. already established procedures or early stage of NQF development).

The survey indicated that **EQF activities (on-going comparison pilots) had a beneficial impact on improved cooperation in the field of qualifications with non-EQF countries** (36 of 61 or 59% of respondents, mainly public authorities, agreed with this statement).

## Efficiency

The section considers findings on to costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and efficiency of the work of the EQF AG and NCPs.

### Costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation

Consultation activities focused on identifying the main funding sources for the EQF and perceptions of the rate between costs and benefits. Stakeholder options were gathered through the survey. Consultations with national level stakeholders mostly focused on gathering factual information rather than opinions, thus they are not presented in this report.

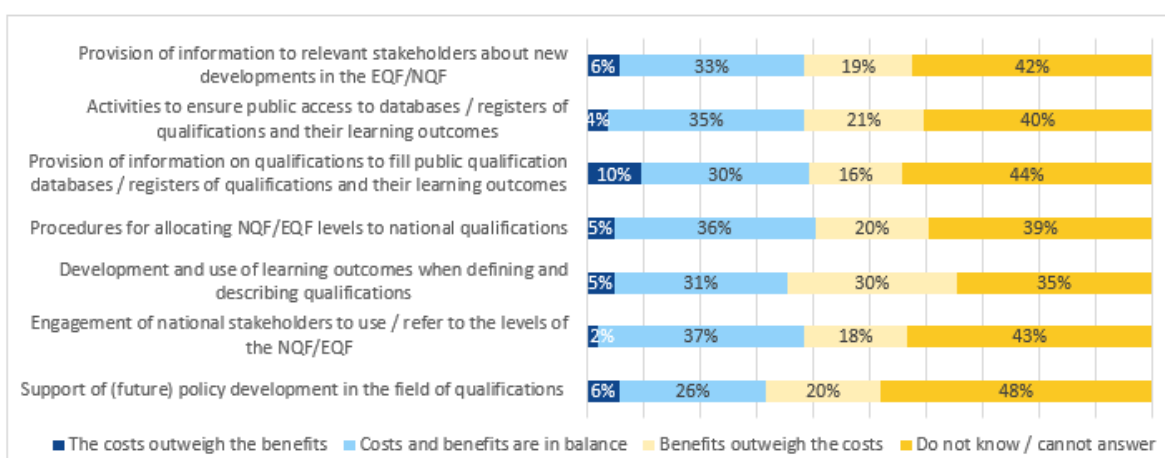
**Survey** respondents (EQF AG and NCPs) selected:

- Erasmus+ EU funding as the main source of funding for activities at the EU level (24 out of 44 or 55%) while this is the second option for activities at the national level (17 out of 44 or 39%).
- National contributions as the main source for activities at the national level (24 out of 44 or 55%), while this is the second main source for activities at the EU level (9 out of 44 or 20%).

Other options (e.g. ESF funding, EU/ bilateral donors) constitute a small part of the funding. Most of these respondents assessed the **adequacy of the financial resources** available to their organisation to conduct their activities in relation to the implementation of the EQF **as fully (8 out of 42 or 19%) or somewhat (28 out of 42 or 67%) adequate**.

Most of the survey respondents (mainly public authorities) **thought that costs and benefits of different activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF are in balance or that benefits outweigh the costs** (see Figure 48 below). It must be noted that up to 48% of the survey respondents were not able to assess the rate between costs and benefits these activities, depending on the element assessed<sup>583</sup>.

**Figure 48. How do you assess the efficiency (rate between costs and benefits) of each of the following activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF in your country**



Note: Total (N)=104.

Source: own elaboration based on targeted online survey results, 2023.

<sup>583</sup> Of 104 respondents, between 36 and 50 (35 to 48%) did not know or could not answer this question, depending on the element assessed.

## Efficiency of the work of the EQF Advisory Group and individual actors (NCPs, Cedefop, ETF)

All interviewed EQF AG members were satisfied with the EQF AG working methods and agreed that the **working methods function well and directly contribute to the Recommendation's implementation**. In particular, the established working methods allow EQF AG members to discuss implementation challenges. They also create networking and knowledge sharing opportunities between countries and stakeholders, for example via Peer Learning Activities (PLA) and project groups that allow to discuss in-depth specific issues. Interviewed EQF AG members and national level stakeholders' experience of AG meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic also confirmed that the current approach (mix of online and face-to-face meetings) reduce costs while keeping the level of productivity stable. Despite the overall positive perception, some broad **challenges** were observed by the interviewees: limited **interactivity**; not always sufficient **time to get acquainted** with EQF AG documents; **brief follow-up** from PLAs and project groups.

Survey respondents with experience in interacting in the EQF AG were asked to provide their assessment on the efficiency of its work. Around 18 out of 40<sup>584</sup> (45%) of the respondents thought that costs and benefits were roughly in balance, with around 12 out of 40<sup>585</sup> (30%) indicating that the benefits outweigh the costs. Only a small minority (around 2 out of 40<sup>586</sup> or 5%) thought that the costs outweighed the benefits. Such concerns are for instance focused on the targeted costs associated with a small number of countries involved in a referencing process.

Looking at the effectiveness of NCPs, more than half of survey respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) agreed or strongly agreed that **the NCPs have taken an active role to ensure awareness and use of the EQF** (50 out of 80 or 63%). At the same time, almost a third (23 out of 80 or 29%) did not know or could not answer this question, showing that **not all stakeholders are sufficiently informed**. Further, interviews with NCPs revealed **limited cooperation between NCPs**, indicating that regular meetings, exchange of experience and networking would be useful.

Looking at the effectiveness of Cedefop and ETF, **their work on the EQF implementation was perceived well by** stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities (including EQF AG members and NCPs) and international qualifications experts). In particular, interviewees (EQF AG members, NCPs and international qualifications experts) mentioned that EQF AG documents to which Cedefop and ETF contribute were useful and well prepared, events were always a forum for fruitful discussions with a lot of information provided by participating experts. The majority of **survey** respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities) were also happy with the work of Cedefop, as between 38 and 55 of 102 respondents (38-54%) selected that Cedefop's work is quite useful or indispensable for progress on implementing the EQF, depending on the element assessed. Similarly, on the usefulness of ETF for the implementation of EQF, nine to 10 respondents (out of 12, mainly consisting of public authorities) selected the work as quite useful or indispensable. It must be noted up to 43% (44 of 102) of respondents in the survey did not know or could not answer the question on

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<sup>584</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (16 out of 40 or 40%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (21 out of 40 or 53%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (16 out of 40 or 40%); Stimulating national level discussions (20 out of 40 or 50%).

<sup>585</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (13 out of 40 or 33%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (12 out of 40 or 30%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (12 out of 40 or 30%); Stimulating national level discussions (10 out of 40 or 25%).

<sup>586</sup> Average of different statements evaluated by respondents is provided. Respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Clarifying conceptual issues and development of methodologies (2 out of 40 or 5%); Exchange of information and sharing experience (1 out of 40 or 3%); Collaborative review of the (re-)referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF (4 out of 40 or 10%); Stimulating national level discussions (2 out of 40 or 5%).

the usefulness of Cedefop's work on EQF implementation. Too few responses (12) about the work of ETF were received in survey to provide robust findings.

## Coherence

The different consultation activities showed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation **is overall coherent with national policy initiatives and instruments**. The majority of survey respondents, across stakeholder types, strongly agreed (22 out of 102 or 21%) or agreed (57 out of 102 or 56%) with this statement, echoing the responses to the PC, where the majority strongly agreed (13 out of 57 or 23%) or agreed (60% or 34 out of 57) that the 2017 EQF Recommendation is consistent with national policy initiatives and instruments.

Stakeholder consultations also showed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation **is coherent with other EU initiatives and instruments**. The majority of survey respondents (mainly public authorities) agreed (51 out of 102 or 50%) or strongly agreed (22 out of 102 or 22%) with this statement, in line with PC findings, where the majority of respondents (mainly someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) agreed (115 out of 229 or 50%) or strongly agree (59 out of 229 or 26%) that the 2017 EQF Recommendation is consistent with other EU initiatives and instruments. In both cases, almost 20% of the respondents could not assess this statement. However, the case study consultations identified **scope for further synergies** between the EQF and other EU tools and initiatives such as the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO). For instance, Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly consisting of public authorities) call for the alignment of EQF and ESCO terminology following changes in qualification descriptors that occurred after the adoption of 2017 EQF Recommendation (e.g. the descriptions of qualifications and competences). **Romanian** and **Finnish** stakeholders, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, both suggest that current communication of the EQF is not sufficiently structured or targeted to specific groups on both European and national levels and that more outreach to labour market actors is needed. In this respect, Romanian stakeholders further point out that the EQF terminology should be better aligned with the terminology used by employers and training providers.

## EU added value

The survey and PC results showed that **increased comparability and transparency** as supported by the EQF and the 2017 EQF Recommendation **would not have been possible without an European-level action and are better achieved at EU level**. For example, the vast majority of survey and PC respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) thought that the EQF had a substantial or some contribution to cooperation in EQF-relevant domains:

- to the development of a common European approach to qualifications (survey: 97 out of 102 (95%) and PC: 216 out of 229 or 94%);
- to establishing more substantial policy cooperation in the field of qualifications (survey: 92 out of 102 (90%) and PC: 198 out of 229 or 86%).

In addition, survey (75-82 out of 102 or 74-80%<sup>587</sup>) and PC (160-177 out of 229 or 70-77%<sup>588</sup>) respondents thought that **Member States achieved better results with EU intervention rather than alone** in comparability, transparency, portability and in increasing understanding and trust of qualifications from other countries.

In comparison, the share of survey respondents who attributed increased cooperation in non-EQF policy areas is much lower, with 27 out of 102 or 26% assessing the contribution as “substantial” and 36 out of 102 or 35% as “some”. This is the case for the PC as well, where 57 out of 229 or 25% saw no contribution of the EQF to new areas.

## Relevance

Key developments that **impact the relevance of the EQF and stakeholders’ needs include: ageing societies, green and digital transitions, and migratory pressures**. In particular, national stakeholders in the case studies, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, highlighted migration (mentioned by stakeholders in Lithuania, Romania, Sweden and Portugal) and demographic changes (mentioned by stakeholders in Lithuania), whilst the survey and PC showed that the following macro-trends will impact the needs of EQF stakeholders in ways which will require further EQF revisions (survey) and the development of qualifications and their frameworks (PC):

- digital transitions (including AI and automation) (survey: 40 out of 102 or 39% were quite sure and PC: 132 of 267 or 49% selected this option as most impactful)
- green transitions (survey: 30 out of 102 or 29% were quite sure and PC: 14 of 267 or 5% selected this option as most impactful)
- migration (survey: 28 out of 102 or 27% were quite sure and PC: 58 of 267 or 22% selected this option as most impactful)
- demographic changes (survey: 22 out of 102 or 22% were quite sure and PC: 45 out of 267 or 17% selected this option as most impactful).

Other macro-trends changing the needs of EQF stakeholders include **changes in the life expectancy of Europe’s population, the increasing importance of remote education, changes in perceptions towards democracy, and eroding trust in governments and institutions**.

Against the backdrop of these developments, consultation activities pointed to the **continued relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its objectives**. Survey and PC respondents (mainly consisting of public authorities, someone ensuring the quality and/or recognition of qualifications and holders of qualifications) reflected slightly different views, with survey respondents being more positive, but respondents of both the survey and PC showed continuous relevance of the following 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives:

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<sup>587</sup> Numbers are provided in the interval as respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Increased support for Increasing understanding of qualifications from other countries; Increasing trust in qualifications from other countries; Providing information about qualifications from other countries (transparency); Improving the possibilities to compare qualifications from other countries (comparability); Better facilitating the recognition of qualifications from other countries (portability).

<sup>588</sup> Numbers are provided in the interval as respondents were asked to separately evaluate the following statements: Increased support for Increasing understanding of qualifications from other countries; Increasing trust in qualifications from other countries; Providing information about qualifications from other countries (transparency); Improving the possibilities to compare qualifications from other countries (comparability); Better facilitating the recognition of qualifications from other countries (portability).



- Building trust and understanding in qualifications and its systems (survey: 84 out of 104 or 81% and PC: 143 out of 267 or 54%)
- Achieving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications (survey: 64 of 104 or 62% and PC: 158 out of 267 or 59%)
- Supporting flexible learning pathways across all types and forms of learning (survey: 72 out of 104 or 69% and PC: 133 out of 267 or 50%)
- Facilitating more seamless transitions between education/training and employment (survey: 62 of 104 or 59% and PC: 124 out of 267 or 46%)

The relevance of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and its objectives were also confirmed by national stakeholders consulted in five case study countries (Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and Sweden), including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries. National stakeholders even stressed that the relevance is likely to increase due to recent social, economic and policy shifts.

According to survey respondents and national stakeholders consulted in five case study countries (Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and Sweden), the provisions of **the 2017 EQF Recommendation currently meet their needs, though further focus on the implementation of certain aspects is needed to respond to the changing context and needs:**

- Strengthened communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public. According to consulted Romanian and Finnish stakeholders, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, the communication and outreach of the EQF to the wider public is currently not systematic, not sufficiently structured or targeted to specific groups on both European and national levels. Consulted Finnish stakeholders (authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers) further emphasise that currently communication concerning EQF does not clearly outline the potential practical use and limitations of EQF for different target groups. Therefore, the expectations of different target groups around the usage of this tool are not well managed. This sentiment is shared by PC respondents and online validation workshop participants. Lithuanian stakeholders (mainly public authorities) believe that better communication and outreach of EQF could be attained by regular monitoring and evaluation of the use of information published in national databases, evaluating how often and by which groups the information is being accessed.
- Information collected for qualification documents, supplements and databases/registers. Stakeholders consulted in Romania and Sweden, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, note that currently the elaboration and quality of national registers differ significantly across the EQF countries also they are not sufficiently integrated and lack interoperability. Even though Europass could be seen as a platform for coordinating data in different databases, its uptake currently is not sufficient. In addition, EQF related databases and registers currently do not make use of digital tools (e.g. artificial intelligence) and are not well linked with other existing data sources (e.g. ESCO or Eurostat) which would allow for big data analysis and easier search for relevant information. Lithuanian stakeholders further point out that guidance on how EQF countries should deal with information on qualifications which can no longer be acquired but are still relevant due to individuals holding them is currently lacking. Whether this information should be presented in national databases remains an open question.

- Levelling of international qualifications and facilitating comparison with third-country qualifications. According to stakeholders consulted in Romania and Portugal, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, more structured guidance on the level allocations of international qualifications is needed. Further facilitation of the development of international sectoral qualifications frameworks and providing guidance of their referencing to EQF is also required.
- Guidance on the application of the EQF structure (including and referencing micro-credentials to EQF levels, opening up NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal educational settings; the need to reference general education qualifications to the EQF).

## Annex 5. Report of the validation workshop

The purpose of the online validation workshop that took place on April 17, 2023 was to present and validate the findings of the study with key EQF stakeholders. The workshop discussed lessons learnt and the future perspective of EQF. It brought together 25 representatives of EU and national level stakeholders and experts on qualifications from 13 countries. These included:

- five EU-level agencies and associations in the fields of (higher) education and training, trade and SMEs, and volunteering;
- six national level stakeholders representing ministries of education, science, culture, civil affairs, and research;
- three national agencies for (higher vocational) education or academic information centres;
- three representatives of national qualification authorities and agencies;
- two NCP (Czechia and the Netherlands) representatives;
- one EQF AG representative (Ukraine);
- five European Commission representatives (DG EMPL).

The following sections provide an overview of the workshop, summarising the discussion and key take-aways.

### Welcome and introduction

The workshop was introduced by DG EMPL providing a general overview of the study and explaining the focus of the workshop: validation of the study findings and conclusions, discussion of lessons learnt and of future perspectives of the EQF.

Before starting the discussion, the Contractors (Visionary Analytics and Ockham IPS) presented the study findings and lessons learnt. Minor comments by participants specifically recognised the importance of some elements included in the findings and lessons learnt, such as the need to develop specific notes for knowledge dissemination as well as better linking recognition of qualifications to policies. Apart from references to the inclusion of these specific elements in the report, there were no further comments on the presentation indicating an agreement by participants on the overarching findings.

### Summary of discussions

The workshop was divided into two breakout groups in which participants with diverse backgrounds discussed the same topics regarding the 2017 **EQF Recommendation**. Four questions were presented for discussion in each breakout room, the summaries of which are presented below. The questions were also shared with registered participants a week before the workshop:

1. What is needed to make sure that the European approach to qualifications remains relevant in the next 10 years?

2. What operational objectives would you suggest for the EQF to work on in the coming years?
3. How could such objectives be best achieved?
4. What can be the role of end beneficiaries when revising the approach to EQF / NQF?

As the first two questions focus on relevance and future operational objectives of the EQF, the discussions resulted in overlapping responses. Thus, the summaries of questions one and two are presented together, followed by question three and question four.

### Future approach and operational objectives

Question one asked “**What is needed to make sure that the European approach to qualifications remains relevant in the next 10 years?**”. Several key issues were raised by participants as relevant to the near future of the EQF: enhanced common European approach to EQF; better communication and engagement of target groups in EQF activities; exploring synergies across digital tools and the potential of advancing digital technologies; adaptation to the rapidly evolving education and training landscape; and development of the EQF AG working methods. Question two asked participants to discuss “**What operational objectives would you suggest for the EQF to work on in the coming years?**” There were mixed opinions as to the need for such concrete objectives. On the one hand, the current format which does not include precise targets is seen as appropriate as a flexible guide on implementation of provisions. On the other hand, targets would be useful to assess progress. A mapping of concrete situations instead of concrete objectives might be one means of assessing progress. Nevertheless, some overlapping responses with question one were discussed as potential operational objectives to focus on: better communication and engagement of target groups and exploring synergies across digital tools. Participants highlighted enhanced focus on the international dimension of the EQF, improved support for recognition and validation procedures, and re-referencing as important operational objectives for the near future of the EQF.

Firstly, when discussing ways in which the European approach to qualifications can remain relevant in the next 10 years, participants (including public authority, EU association and NCP representatives) expressed some areas which would benefit from a stronger **common approach to EQF**. This included building a common language of learning outcome descriptions to improve the transferability of skills (mobility across borders and sectors). This is viewed as an area of key relevance as inconsistencies in interpretation across sectors and countries remain. A common language and approach would allow for better interpretation across qualification frameworks. Moreover, in one example a common approach to the short descriptions of learning outcomes was highlighted as a means to improve employer understanding of the content of qualifications and ease the comparison of qualifications across or between qualification frameworks and systems. On the theme of stronger common approach to EQF, it was also expressed by NCP and public authority stakeholders that there is a need to reflect on the nuances in national contexts. Different countries have different needs and therefore the relevance of the EQF will vary across them. Standardisation can be restrictive, but also supports the transparency and transferability of skills – a balance should be encouraged which reflects this.

The **quickly changing landscape of education and training** (e.g. digitalisation, micro-credentials) was also discussed in relation to ensuring a relevant approach to qualifications in the future. It was suggested that the EQF must have the ability to adapt and respond quickly to the evolving landscape in order to remain relevant.

Moreover, both discussions surrounding the continued relevance of the EQF and the focus on future operational objectives involved consideration of **advancing digitalisation and the integration of digital tools**:

- Stakeholders from an EU-level education and training agency discussed that AI based tools could be more linked with EQF (e.g. AI techniques to develop qualifications, learning outcomes – work being undertaken by ESCO) and that

developments in digitalisation, and in particular in AI, should be considered and reflected in the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

- It was suggested that operational objectives should include building links between the EQF and existing digital tools, taxonomies and databases such as ESCO and Eurostat. It was stressed during discussions that coordination across digital tools can assist in the provision of more relevant and accessible data. For example, a public authority stakeholder suggested that the creation of searchable databases of learning outcomes and qualifications (via ESCO) or the provision of additional labour market information on qualifications (e.g. level and sector employment outcomes of achieved qualifications, via Eurostat) will help to provide relevant and accessible data to employers and jobseekers.
- In terms of accessibility, it was also indicated by public authority and EU-level association representatives that the EQF could replace the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) both as an obligatory data field in EUROPASS and as a statistical tool used in European education and training policy.

An additional operational objective suggested as a focus for the coming years which would ensure the relevance of EQF the better **communication, engagement, and participation with target groups and across countries**. There was a consensus that improved outreach and stakeholder (e.g. career advisors, employees, and employers) engagement and awareness of EQF and its activities are essential for the EQF to be useful for learners, workers and employers in supporting mobility. More effective delivery of information at a practical level is needed to benefit some target groups, such as employers and students. Consideration of differences in target group needs should be reflected, for example, selective communication to each target group can avoid overburdening individuals with too much technical information. Target groups should be aware of how the EQF applies directly to them. Public employment services were highlighted by an EU-level education and training agency as a relevant target group, more so than workers, as the EQF can be used to facilitate job advertisements and employment. More generally, relevant target groups which would benefit from improved awareness and participation in EQF included labour market actors such as employers, social partners, and education and training providers.

Moreover, the **need for communication between countries** was also highlighted and it was suggested by one public authority stakeholder, for example, that communication between countries and NCPs on specific elements (e.g. levelling procedures) would facilitate implementation and exchange of good practice. Communication and **cooperation with third countries** was also referenced by an EU-level agency representative as a relevant operational objective to continue focusing on. It was discussed that better communication could overcome perceived challenges faced by third countries (e.g. the perception that comparisons are overly technical and a lack of understanding). Communication should include the dissemination of comparison methods and tools used. There is a need for better dissemination of notes with a consideration of how these are effectively packaged, accessed, and understood, which will also help to promote the EQF in third countries. It was discussed that focus should be paid to the support of international and transnational activities (to support mobility), including improvement in areas of comparable qualifications (or joint qualifications), collaborative awarding, and connections to referencing to other qualification frameworks.

Additionally, participants of the workshop highlighted **recognition and validation procedures** as an area requiring focus in the future. These procedures are highly beneficial to users, but further development and support is needed, including links to validation and the promotion of the use of NQFs in recognition. Moreover, one EU-level education and training agency representative noted that while the linking between recognition of qualifications to policies is mentioned in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, this is a topic that

could be further highlighted (e.g. in relation to automatic recognition) and could provide additional clarity to third countries on the role of the EQF in the recognition of qualifications.

Finally, **re-referencing** was considered an important area of focus for the future work of the EQF by several public authority stakeholders. It was suggested that this could be an activity promoting relevance and suitability or implemented from a qualitative perspective.

### Implementation of objectives

Question three asked participants “**How could such objectives be best achieved?**” While stakeholders did not focus entirely on the specific objectives identified, suggestions were made about ways in which the EQF operational objectives could be better implemented: focus on the implementation of the EQF across participating countries; better alignment and coherence of the EQF with EU legislation and related recommendations at national level; and improved visibility of EQF activities and information.

Firstly, there was a consensus that the 2017 EQF Recommendation remains relevant and that there is no need for a revision of the Recommendation. Some stakeholders (including public authority and EU-level association representatives) perceived that it could be best to **focused on the implementation** of the current Recommendation. Specifically, a public authority stakeholder suggested and there was agreement that participating EQF countries would benefit from the opportunity to critically reflect on the status of their respective implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, sharing status updates moving forward, and to identify gaps (and work towards closing them), and work towards building cohesion with national legislation.

Moreover, participants indicated that it should be ensured that the EQF is **aligned and prominent in EU legislation** to better support the implementation of its objectives. It was noted that there is a need for greater visibility of the EQFs role in EU initiatives and of references to the EQF in other legislative documents. From the discussions, an EU-level university association representative suggested that a mapping of EU legislative and policy documents might provide a useful tool to establish the EQFs status in this respect. Similarly, it was discussed that the integration of the 2017 EQF Recommendation with related recommendations (e.g. on recognition) and tools would facilitate collaborative efforts (and governance) of the implementation at national level. Integrating the EQF with national level initiatives which receive greater priority than the EQF could foster the EQF implementation.

Additionally, participants indicated that the dissemination of **EQF information and knowledge sharing** (related to project group activities, comparisons, etc.) requires improvement. The need for developing and disseminating specific notes was viewed as fundamental to make EQF knowledge widely available to the public. This includes developing improved visibility of the EQF across different channels (e.g. EU official websites).

Finally, the **working methods of the EQF AG** were discussed as a means to effectively implement the EQF objectives and ensure the relevance of the EQF. In particular, public authority and EU-level association stakeholders suggested that more focused attention to specific topics (e.g. international sectorial qualifications) is needed. One suggested way to achieve this was through the creation of standing groups which could better focus on specific provisions (such as the subgroup on comparing qualifications). However, it was also noted by some public authority stakeholders that the creation of additional standing groups would not address limitations of the EQF at the national level and that the EQF AG should better reflect the nuances of country contexts and legislative barriers which can limit the implementation. The provision of viable outputs might be enhanced through changes in working methods whereby the EQF AG might first consider the specific contexts of NQFs before considering the wider EQF context. Moreover, it was briefly discussed that the EQF AG could further promote transparency and consistency which benefit the overall implementation of its objectives.

## Role of end beneficiaries

The final question asked was “**What can be the role of end beneficiaries when revising the approach to EQF / NQF?**” The specific role of end beneficiaries was not thoroughly discussed by participants, who instead focused on the barriers to end beneficiaries engagement. Suggestions were made on how the role of end beneficiaries might be enhanced and the EQF made more accessible: better communication and dissemination of information and exploring synergies between the EQF and ESCO.

The discussion highlighted **challenges in communicating the EQF** and its relevance to end beneficiaries. Improved visibility of the EQF, for example through education in schools which highlights its relevance to students and career advisors, was deemed beneficial. It was suggested that considerations should be taken on how to address different users with different needs. For example, an EQF AG representative suggested that communication with developers of occupational standards was seen to have been beneficial to professional organisations and employers as it improves general knowledge of tools, helping to establish coherent standards. Moreover, it was suggested that there is a need to widen the types of stakeholders involved at EU and national level which could better enhance inclusion and engagement.

Exploring **synergies between the EQF with ESCO** was deemed beneficial to enhance the role of end beneficiaries. Linking ESCO with qualifications could improve the understanding and consistency of learning outcomes. Moreover, integrating ESCO within databases provides the opportunity to build shareable and consistent data. Creating automated searchable databases (facilitated by ESCO) would make information more accessible to end beneficiaries. However, importantly it was noted by an EU-level SME and trade association stakeholder that this would be less relevant to employers, and it was suggested that employers would benefit more from relevant real labour market data (such as how qualifications translate to employment in reality). Generally, however, there was a consensus that there needs to be better synergies between available digital tools and taxonomies (e.g. consistency between ESCO, Europass, and EQF terminology) and that this could better engage end beneficiaries in the application of EQF.

## Key take-aways

The findings from the workshop provide insights on the main factors impacting the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and what should be considered for the future. The **main take-aways** include:

- Overarching conclusions and lessons learnt from the study were well received by participants. They did not have significant comments, indicating agreement with the overarching findings of the study.
- To ensure the European approach to qualifications remains relevant in the next 10 years, the EQF needs to adapt to the quickly changing landscape of education and training. There should be a strengthened common approach and language which facilitates transparency and transferability; improved stakeholder involvement and practical and nuanced delivery and communication to target groups; the integration of existing (digital) tools, taxonomies and databases (e.g. ESCO, Eurostat); and a reflection of EQF AG working methods which considers implementation in different national contexts.
- Operational objectives which the EQF should work on in the coming years include awareness and participation across countries, increasing stakeholder engagement and national collaboration; digitalisation and linking with other tools (e.g. ESCO); internationalisation and support of transnational mobility through comparable

qualifications; further development of and links to recognition and validation procedures; and re-referencing. There is however no clear agreement whether the EQF needs concrete operational objectives.

- Objectives can be best achieved, not through a revision of the current Recommendation, but by a results focused approach to the implementation of the (still relevant) current recommendation. To effectively achieve objectives there should be a critical reflection of the current status of national implementation and identification of gaps; further alignment and awareness of EQF with EU legislation; integration of EQF with relevant initiatives and recommendations with improved collaborative governance efforts at the national level; and improved visibility of EQF and dissemination of information, including for third countries, and through the development of guiding notes on specific topics (e.g. re-referencing, short qualification descriptions, and descriptive information on the labour market value of qualifications).
- The role of end beneficiaries when revising the approach to EQF / NQF concerns an improved awareness and understanding of the relevance of EQF to specific end beneficiaries types and a widened variety of stakeholders involved in EQF at the EU and national level. The creation of searchable, shareable, and consistent databases by linking them with ESCO was also highlighted as a means for the EQF to benefit end beneficiaries (such as employment services, although deemed less relevant to employers who would benefit more so from accessible real labour market data) and make information more accessible and useable.

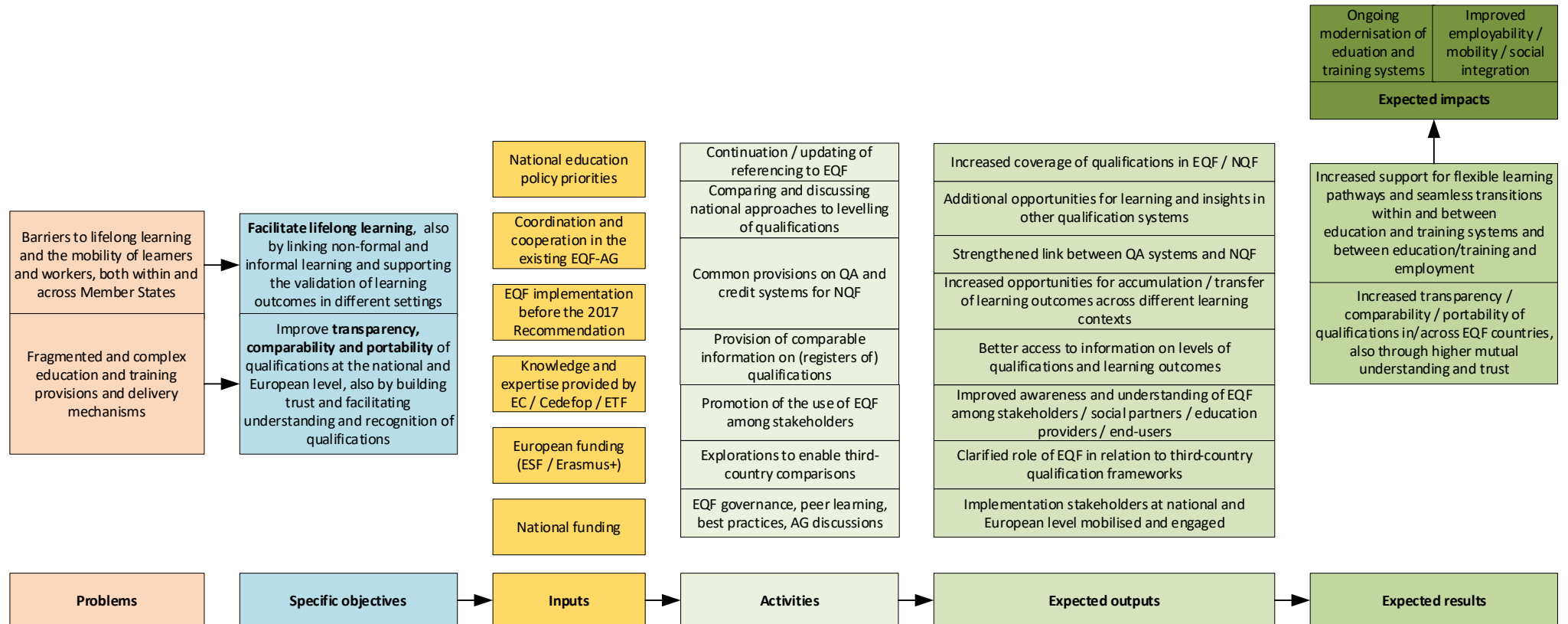
## List of participants

Stakeholder Type	Organisation	Country (if relevant)
Non-profit institution	Academic Information Centre	Latvia
Non-profit institution	Academic Information Centre	Latvia
EU-level agency/association	Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)	Not relevant
NCP	NCP (Netherlands)	Netherlands
NCP	NCP (Czechia)	Czechia
European Commission	DG EMPL	Not relevant
European Commission	DG EMPL	Not relevant
European Commission	DG EMPL	Not relevant
European Commission	DG EMPL	Not relevant
European Commission	DG EMPL	Not relevant



## Annex 6. Intervention logic EQF 2017 Recommendation

Figure 49. Intervention logic



## Annex 7. Evaluation matrix

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question							
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation	
<b>Effectiveness</b>											
1. To what extent and in what manner has the EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving its objectives?	1.1. ...improve the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications at national and European levels, also by building trust and by facilitating the understanding and recognition of qualifications?	The EQF has increased transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications in Europe The EQF increased the understanding and recognition of qualifications	The comparison of the content of qualifications across MS is facilitated as evidenced by the number of comparative studies conducted using the EQF and by opinions of key stakeholders		x						
			The portability of (parts of) qualifications is improved as evidenced by mobility statistics		x						
			Key stakeholders see 1) that the EQF supported transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications; and 2) an increase in the understanding and recognition of qualifications								
	1.2. ...facilitate lifelong learning, also by linking non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes in different settings?	The EQF improved the conditions for lifelong learning by linking non-formal and informal learning to formal learning and supporting validation of learning outcomes in different settings	The number of countries including non-formal qualifications in their NQF	x							
			The number of countries having further developed institutional arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning since 2017 and this being linked to EQF		x						
			The participation of adult learners in education and training increased and this can be linked to the EQF/NQF development		x						
			Key stakeholders see that the EQF contributed to								

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question							
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation	
			improved conditions for lifelong learning								
2. To what extent and in what manner has the EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving the wider objectives	2.1. ...modernise education and training systems	The EQF informed reforms of E&T systems since 2017, applying learning outcome approaches, improving QA, increasing permeability etc.	The number of countries initiated reforms of E&T systems in line with the wider objectives and characteristics of the EQF		x	Section E: (Q17)		x			
			Number of students entering higher education through alternative routes (permeability).		x				x		
			Key stakeholders see that the EQF informed reforms of E&T systems since 2017, applying learning outcome approaches, improving QA, increasing permeability etc.			Section E: (Q17)					
						x		x			
	2.2. ...increase employability, mobility and social integration of learners and workers	The EQF improved conditions for increased employability and labour market integration	The number of countries improved conditions in employment systems and systems for mobility and social integration of learners and workers in line with the EQF		x					x	
			The employment of young people (NEETs)		x						
			The integration of migrants and foreign workers in labour markets		x					x	
			Key stakeholders see that the EQF improved conditions for increased employability and labour market integration of learners and workers						x		x
3. Have there been any unintended consequences of the EQF Recommendation in reaching its objectives?	3.1. What positive unintended consequences resulted from the EQF Recommendation?	NA	NA	x	x		x				
	3.2. What negative unintended consequences resulted from the EQF Recommendation?	NA	NA	x	x		x				

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
4. To what extent have Member States implemented each of the individual elements of the EQF Recommendation (Recommendations 1 to 8)? What implementation obstacles were observed?	4.1a. To what extent has recommendation 1 been implemented (Use EQF to reference NQF)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation increased the use of EQF to reference NQF	Number of countries having referenced their NQF to the EQF (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section A				
	4.1b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 1 (Use EQF to reference NQF)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA		x		x			
	4.2a. To what extent has recommendation 2 been implemented (Review and update the referencing)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation increased update the referencing	Number of countries having reviewed and updated the referencing of levels and number of those planning to engage the process (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section A Section F: EQF referencin g and updates				
	4.2b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 2 (Review and update the referencing)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA		x		x			
	4.3a. To what extent has recommendation 3 been implemented (Quality assurance)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation ensured that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV	Number of countries that ensured that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV (development between 2017-2021)	x					x	
	4.3b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 3 (Quality assurance)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA				x			
	4.4a. To what extent has recommendation 4 been implemented (Credit systems)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation promoted links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or	Number of countries that promoted links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or systems taking into account the common principles on credit systems set out in	x						x

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
		systems taking into account the common principles on credit systems set out in Annex V	Annex V (development between 2017-2021)							
	4.4b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 4 (Credit systems)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA				x			
	4.5a. To what extent has recommendation 5 been implemented (Reference to EQF level)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated countries to take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents by the competent authorities (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements), and/or registers of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.	Number of countries where all newly issued qualification documents make reference to EQF levels (development between 2017-2021) Number of countries where registers of qualifications contain references to EQF levels (development between 2017-2021)	x						
	4.5b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 5 (Reference to EQF level)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA			Section C			x	
	4.6a. To what extent has recommendation 6 been implemented (Availability of referencing process results)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated actions to make results of the referencing process publicly available at national and Union levels	Number of countries where the results of the referencing process are publicly available and form of access (e.g. EU / national level: open web-access, accessible upon request...) (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section A Section C: Coverage of the NQF				
							x			

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question							
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation	
		The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated actions to, where possible, ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published, using the data fields in accordance with Annex VI.	Number of countries that published information on qualifications and their learning outcomes on national databases / registers, using the data fields in accordance with Annex VI (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section D				x	
			Number of countries sharing national qualification databases / registers on Europass platform and extent of coverage	x		Section D					
	4.6b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 6 (Availability of referencing process results)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA				x			x	
	4.7a. To what extent has recommendation 7 been implemented (Encourage use of EQF)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated actions to encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities to support the comparison of qualifications and transparency of the learning outcomes.	Number of countries that took actions to encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section A				x	x
	4.7b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 7 (Encourage use of EQF)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA				x			x	x

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question							
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation	
	4.8a. To what extent has recommendation 8 been implemented (Continuation and coordination of EQF NCP)?	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated actions towards the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCPs increased continuation and coordination of EQF NCP.	Number of countries that took actions towards the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCPs increased continuation and coordination of EQF NCP. having an operational EQF NCP (development between 2017-2021)	x		Section B					
	4.8b. What are strengths and weaknesses related to recommendation 8 (Continuation and coordination of EQF NCP)? What obstacles can be observed?	NA	NA					x			
5. What main effects could be observed as a result of each measure at individual, national and European levels? What factors hinder or enhance the effectiveness of the measures?	5.1a. EQF: How has the status of the EQF as a comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications in Europe evolved since 2017?	The status of the EQF as a comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications in Europe has increased	The implemented NQFs are widened in scope (more education sectors, more qualifications) since 2017 Key stakeholders see that NQFs are widened in scope (more education sectors, more qualifications) since 2017	x	x	Section C		x	x		
	5.1b. EQF: How has this influenced the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks and systems?	The status of the EQF as a comprehensive framework for all types and levels of qualifications influenced the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks and systems	More national and regional qualifications frameworks and systems emerged since 2017 that took the EQF as reference point	x	x						
			Key stakeholders see that the EQF influenced the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks and systems.				x				
	5.2a. EQF referencing and updates: To what extent the referencing criteria and process contributed to opening up systems, improving	The application of referencing criteria improved transparency, trust	Key stakeholders see that the referencing of NQFs to the EQF contributes to higher levels of transparency, trust and					x		x	

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	transparency, trust and cooperation between countries?	and cooperation between countries?	cooperation between countries							
	5.2b. EQF referencing and updates: To what extent the referencing process has improved comparability of qualifications and what areas could be further improved in this regard?	The application of the referencing process has improved comparability of qualifications	More comparative studies are conducted enabled by the EQF as reference point, serving different objectives – scientific (e.g. establish trends, design training content) and practical (to design mobility experience, for recognition) Key stakeholders see that the application of the referencing process has improved comparability of qualifications		x	Section E: (Q17)				x
	5.2c What could be improved in terms of making qualifications better comparable?	NA	NA				x			x
	5.3a Availability and accessibility of information on qualifications: How effective has the indication of EQF and NQF levels on qualifications, on supplements and in registers or databases been in increasing transparency for different target groups?	The accessibility for different target groups of information of EQF/NQF levels of qualification improved	Information about the level of qualifications and the learning outcomes (presented in national qualification registers / databases) is accessible for different target groups as evidenced in national studies (when available) and as indicated by stakeholders Key stakeholders see that accessibility of information of EQF/NQF levels of qualification improved for different target groups		x	Section C	x			x
	5.3b Availability and accessibility of information on qualifications: How effective are national qualifications registers or databases and their interconnection at European level (through the Europass	The interconnection between national qualifications registers and the Europass Platform allows to reach and inform more stakeholders about	Key stakeholders see that the interconnection between national qualifications registers and the Europass Platform allows to reach and inform more stakeholders about	x			x			x
					x	Section D				x



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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	platform) in reaching and informing stakeholders?	information on qualifications.	information on qualifications.							
	5.3c Availability and accessibility of information on qualifications: To what extent has the common format (Annex VI EQF Recommendation) for presenting information on qualifications on databases/registers been effective in improving availability of information for different target groups?	The common format (Annex VI EQF Recommendation) for presenting information on qualifications on databases/registers improved availability of information for different target groups	Key stakeholders see that the common format (Annex VI EQF Recommendation) for presenting information on qualifications on databases/registers improved availability of information for different target groups	x		Section D Section E: Use and impact of the NQF (Q16)	x			x
	5.3d How can the presentation of information on qualifications be further improved?	NA	NA	x						x
	5.4. Qualifications outside formal education training system: To what extent has the inclusion of qualifications offered outside the formal education and training system (e.g. private qualifications, international qualifications) in national qualifications framework referenced to the EQF been effective in better linking formal, non-formal and informal learning?	The inclusion of qualifications outside the formal E&T system in NQFs increased	Number of countries that included qualifications outside the formal E&T system in NQFs increased since 2017	x		Section C				x
		The inclusion of those qualifications improved links between formal, non-formal and informal learning	Key stakeholders indicate improved links between formal, non-formal and informal learning				x			x
	5.5a How are the quality assurance principles used in practice in countries and what effects can be observed as a result of how they are used?	NA	NA	x		Section E: (Q17)				x
	5.5b How are the principles for credit systems used in practice in countries and what effects can be observed as a result of how they are used?	NA	NA	x						x
6. To what extent the EQF Recommendation	6.1 To what extent did the EQF and the related activities contributed to a better	The EQF increased understanding of the content and level of	Number of cross-links between EQF and third country (countries that are		x	Section G		x		x

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
contributed to the integration of migrants by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union?	understanding of qualifications frameworks and systems of third countries?	qualifications outside the Union	not implementing EQF) Qualifications frameworks Key stakeholders indicate an increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications outside the Union as a results of the EQF and implemented activities				x		x	
	6.1 To what extent did the EQF and the related activities contributed to the integration of migrants by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union?	The EQF improved the integration of migrants in the labour market through improved understanding of their qualifications	Number of requests for recognition of qualifications of migrants handled by ENIC-NARIC centres in which EQF was used		x				x	
			Key stakeholders indicate that the EQF improved the integration of migrants in the labour market through improved understanding of their qualifications				x	x		
7. To what extent has the existing governance structure contributed to the implementation and operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation?	7.1. ...at national level, including engagement of national stakeholders and the role of NCPs?	The national infrastructure supported the implementation and operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation	Key stakeholders indicate that the national infrastructure is engaging all national stakeholders			Section B	x	x		
	7.2.a1 ...at European level, in view of the roles of the European Commission and the EQF Advisory Group?	The European level infrastructure supported the implementation and operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation	Key stakeholders indicate that the European level infrastructure is supportive to the implementation				x	x		
	7.2.a2. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 9: Support consistency in the further implementation of the EQF across Member States by comparing and discussing the	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 9	x						

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	methodologies used for the levelling of qualifications in national qualifications frameworks or systems, with due regard to national contexts.									
	7.2.a3. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 10: With due regard to national contexts, support the development of methodologies for the description, use and application of learning outcomes to increase transparency and the understanding and comparability of qualifications.	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 10	x						
	7.2.a4. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 11: Support the setting up of voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications through national qualification frameworks or systems and information exchange and consultation between Member States on those procedures to ensure consistency.	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 11	x						
	7.2.a5. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 12: Develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued certificates, diplomas and supplements, and/or registers of qualifications, in accordance	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 12	x						

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	with national systems and regulations on certificates and diplomas.									
	7.2.a6. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 13: Explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable, in accordance with international agreements, the comparison of third countries' national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF.	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 13	x						
	7.2.a7. To what extent the Commission and the EQF Advisory group have been effective in implementing Recommendations 14: Set up peer learning and best practice exchanges between the Member States and, where appropriate, facilitate peer counselling at the request of the Member States.	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 14	x						
	7.2.a8. To what extent the Commission has been effective in implementing Recommendations 15: Ensure that the implementation of this recommendation is supported through actions funded by relevant Union programmes	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 15	x		x				
	7.2.a9. To what extent the Commission has been effective in implementing Recommendations 16: Ensure an effective governance of the EQF implementation by maintaining and fully supporting the EQF Advisory Group established in 2009 composed	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 16a	x						

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	of representatives of the Member States and other participating countries, the social partners and other stakeholders as appropriate.									
	7.2.a9a To what extent has the Commission been effective in facilitating that the EQF AG could ensure overall coherence and promote transparency and trust in process of referencing NQF	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 16b	x			x			
	7.2.a10. To what extent the Commission has been effective in implementing Recommendations 17: Report on progress following the adoption of this recommendation, as appropriate, in the context of relevant education, training and employment policy frameworks.	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 17	x						
	7.2.b. What implementation obstacles were observed?	NA	NA					x		
	7.3. ...at international level, in view of cooperation with third countries?	The cooperation with third countries and international stakeholders increased	Occurrence and intensity of cooperation with third countries and international stakeholders		x		x			
	7.4. What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work of the EQF Advisory Group and communication processes with stakeholders? What are lessons learned in that context (e.g. use of digital tools, remodelling of work and communication processes).	Not applicable	Not applicable	x						
						Section G		x		
8. How effective have the working methods of the EQF governance structure been?	Not applicable	The working methods positively contributed to the European Commission and the EQF AG reaching its results	Key stakeholders indicate that the working methods positively contribute to the EQF implementation and increases mutual trust between EQF stakeholders						x	

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Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
9. To what extent and in what manner has the contribution of Cedefop and ETF supported the operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation?	Not applicable	Cedefop and ETF positively contributed to the operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation	The contribution of Cedefop and ETF is positively assessed by the key stakeholders		x		x			
			Cedefop and ETF publications and events serve as reference points in EQF/NQF related debates as judged by key stakeholders				x			
10. How have communication efforts around the EQF contributed to its implementation and the level of awareness of different stakeholders?	10.1. Have the communication activities, their scope and target group been effective in increasing awareness about the EQF?	The communication activities increased awareness about the EQF	Effectiveness of communication activities in increasing awareness		x	Section E: (Q16)			x	x
			Key stakeholders indicate that communication efforts contributed to a higher level of awareness of different stakeholders			Section E: (Q16)				
	10.2. Is the EQF used by stakeholders outside the formal referencing process and to what end?	NA	NA		x					
<b>Efficiency</b>										
12. What costs and benefits are associated with the implementation of the EQF Recommendation for different stakeholders at local, national and EU levels? Are implementation costs proportionate to the benefits brought to individuals, economy and society? (NB: this included Q13 as well)	12.1. How are different EU level funding sources used for the implementation of the EQF?	Not applicable	Estimated use of Erasmus+ at national and European level. Estimated use of ESF funds at national and European level. Calculation of costs on EU level: - for the governance of the EQF AG - for the governance of the EQF NCPs - for financial support to EQF-related activities, such as EQF pilot projects, projects financed by Erasmus+, projects financed by the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Cedefop, and							
					x		x			

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
			events/conferences on EQF.							
	12.2. How are different national level funding sources used for the implementation of the EQF?	Not applicable	Calculation of costs on national level: - for the governance of the EQF NCPs - for funding of EQF-related projects		x					x
			Calculation of costs on local/provider level: exemplary costs of implementation of the EQF, such as costs for including existing certificates/diplomas in NQFs; renewal process for being included in the NQF		x					x
	12.3. What are the benefits brought to individuals, economy and society?	Not applicable	Qualitative description of benefits: - individuals - economy - society		x	Section E: (Q18)				x
	12.4. Which sources of EU funding have contributed to achieving the EQF objectives and what has been their cost-effectiveness?	The implementation costs are proportionate to the benefits brought to individuals, economy and society.	Comparing of costs to identified benefits		x					x
14. To what extent has the work of the EQF Advisory Group and NCPs been efficient? What factors influence the efficiency with which the results were achieved and how?	14.1 To what extent has the work of the EQF Advisory Group been efficient?	The efficiency of the work of the EQF Advisory Group is high as judged by key stakeholders	Number of key stakeholders that assess the efficiency as high in supporting exchange of information and networking between countries by, for example, organising meetings and peer learning activities				x	x		x
	14.2 To what extent has the work of the NCPs been efficient?	The efficiency of the work of the NCPs is high as judged by key stakeholders	Number of key stakeholders that assess the efficiency as high in: - support for national developments from a technical perspective - promote the EQF/NQF				x	x		x

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question							
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation	
			among individuals and organisations - provide access to information on EQF referencing, the NQF, included qualifications (levels and learning outcomes) - promote the participation of all relevant stakeholders								
	14.3 What factors influence the efficiency with which the results were achieved and how?	Not applicable	Gathering information on factors influencing (both positively and negatively) the efficiency					x	x		
<b>Relevance</b>											
15. To what extent the elements of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (in particular EQF levels, referencing process, referencing criteria, quality criteria, principles on credit systems, data elements of qualifications, qualification registers, international qualifications, third country dimension) correspond to the various stakeholders' needs? Are there missing elements or elements that are not needed?	15.1. To what extent do the elements of the 2017 EQF recommendation correspond to the various stakeholders' needs?	The relevance of the 2017 Recommendation's elements is high as judged by various stakeholders.	Share of respondents among the different stakeholder groups that assess the relevance as high for each of the elements of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (in particular EQF levels, referencing process, referencing criteria, quality criteria, principles on credit systems, data elements of qualifications, qualification registers, international qualifications, third country dimension).				x				
		The fit between elements of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and stakeholders' needs is confirmed by existing evaluations.	Evidence of relevance for various stakeholders provided by existing evaluations		x	Section E: (Q18)					
	15.2. Are there missing elements which could have improved further the relevance	Not applicable		Gathering indications on missing elements or elements that are not needed.		x	Section E: (Q18)	x			



STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
	of the Recommendation or elements that are not needed?									
16. To what extent the objectives of the EQF Recommendation are still relevant in view of shifts in stakeholders' and end-users needs?	Not applicable	The relevance of the objectives of the 2017 Recommendation is high as judged by key stakeholders.	Share of respondents among the different stakeholder groups that assess the relevance of the objectives as high				x			x
		Literature reviews validate/extend key stakeholders' relevance assessment	Gathering elements on changing/future needs of the various stakeholders in relation with the EQF's objectives		x					
17. To what extent the elements of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are still relevant in the context of recent and future technological (e.g. development of platforms, digital credentialing, artificial intelligence, online tools) and broader EU policy (e.g. green and digital transitions, use of micro-credentials, focus on lifelong learning, recognition of foreign qualifications, skills based recruitment from EQF as well as non-EQF countries) developments?	NA	The relevance of the objectives of the 2017 Recommendation is high as judged by key stakeholders in the light of future technological (e.g. development of platforms, digital credentialing, artificial intelligence, online tools) and broader EU policy (e.g. green and digital transitions, use of micro-credentials, focus on lifelong learning, recognition of foreign qualifications, skills based recruitment from EQF as well as non-EQF countries) developments.	Share of respondents among the different stakeholder groups that assess the relevance of the objectives as high				x		x	x
			Literature reviews validate/extend key stakeholders' relevance assessment	x	x					
<b>Coherence</b>										
18. To what extent have the objectives, target groups and	Not applicable	The intervention logic of the Recommendation, as	Degree of internal coherence of the intervention logic as		x			x		

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
measures of the EQF Recommendation been internally coherent?		reconstructed by the evaluators and validated by key stakeholders, is coherent.	assessed by evaluators and key stakeholders							
19. To what extent has the EQF Recommendation been coherent with other policy initiatives and related instruments? Are there synergies or overlaps	19.1. At international level?	The EQF recommendation is coherent with other policy initiatives and instruments, synergies are acknowledged and there are no significant overlaps.	Degree of external coherence of the intervention logic as assessed by evaluators and key stakeholders		x				x	
	19.2. At EU level?	The EQF recommendation is coherent with other policy initiatives and instruments, synergies are acknowledged and there are no significant overlaps.	Degree of external coherence of the intervention logic as assessed by evaluators and key stakeholders	x	x				x	
	19.3. At national level?	The EQF recommendation is coherent with other policy initiatives and instruments, synergies are acknowledged and there are no significant overlaps.	Degree of external coherence of the intervention logic as assessed by evaluators							
<b>EU added value</b>										
20. Could the objectives of the EQF Recommendation have been sufficiently achieved by each Member State acting alone? To what extent the effects identified	20.1. Could the objectives of the EQF Recommendation have been sufficiently achieved by each Member State acting alone?	The added value of the EQF Recommendation to reach the objectives is perceived to be high by key stakeholders	Share of stakeholders agreeing with the opinion that the objectives of the Recommendation could not have been achieved by each MS acting alone				x			x
			Number of countries having joined the process of referencing their NQF to the EQF since 2017 or	x						

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
could have been achieved without EU intervention?			interested in doing so in the future							
			Main areas where the Recommendation has had an added value as identified by stakeholders and on the basis of the effectiveness and efficiency analysis		x		x			x
	20.2. To what extent the effects identified could have been achieved without EU intervention?	The effects (e.g. increased transparency of qualifications etc.) identified could not have been achieved to the same extent without EU intervention as judged by key stakeholders.	Share of stakeholders agreeing with the statement that effects could not have been achieved without the EU intervention.		x			x		x
21. To what extent the EQF Recommendation contributed to developing a common European approach to qualifications? Has the EQF Recommendation led to policy cooperation in new areas at EU level?	21.1. To what extent did the EQF Recommendation contribute to developing a common European approach to qualifications?	Stakeholders identify a common European approach to qualifications, which is also visible in convergences as regards for instance the use and understanding of learning outcomes, the functions and features of NQFs, stakeholder involvement in NQF etc.	Stakeholders agreeing to the opinion that the Recommendation contributed to developing a common European approach to qualifications		x					x
	21.2. Has the EQF Recommendation led to policy cooperation in new areas at EU level?	Not applicable	Gathering elements indicating that the EQF Recommendation led to policy cooperation in new areas at EU level	x	x			x		
22. To what extent the issues addressed by the EQF	Not applicable	Not applicable	Key stakeholders' opinion on the need for and added value of continuing actions at EU level on the issues		x		x			

STUDY SUPPORTING THE EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION OF 22 MAY 2017 ON THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Question	Sub-question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Methodological approach to answer evaluation question						
				Country mapping	Further desk research	Cedefop NQF inventory	Targeted online survey	Interviews	Case studies	Public consultation
Recommendation continue to require action at EU level?			addressed by the Recommendation							
<b>Cross-cutting</b>										
11: What lessons learnt can be drawn for the future development and implementation of the EQF Recommendation?	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable		x	Section E: (Q19, Q20)				x

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