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## **Frequently asked questions about the European Qualifications Framework**

### **What is the EQF?**

The EQF is a reference framework which will relate different countries' qualifications systems and frameworks together. It will act as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable to employers, individuals and institutions, so that workers and learners can use their qualifications in other countries.

It has two principal aims: to facilitate mobility and lifelong learning.

### **Why is the EU establishing the EQF now?**

The EQF Recommendation responds to requests from member states and social partners for an instrument to promote transparency of qualifications, to facilitate workers and learners' mobility. It has been developed and adopted in less than 4 years, so it is meeting an urgent need and priority identified by the countries.

### **What do countries have to do? What are the deadlines for implementation?**

It's a voluntary framework, so there are no formal legal obligations *per se* on the countries. 2010 is the recommended target date for countries to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF, 2012 for them to ensure that individual qualification certificates bear a reference to the appropriate EQF level.

### **How will the EQF work?**

The Recommendation sets targets of 2010 for countries to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF, so that a network of related national systems is established in Europe, with the EQF as the central reference point. Once this is completed, it will be possible to compare levels of qualifications in different countries against the EQF levels and against other countries' qualifications levels. Comparison is possible because the EQF's central component – its descriptors grid – uses learning outcomes as its basis.

At a practical level, from 2012 all new qualifications should bear a reference to the EQF, so that employers and institutions can identify a candidate's skills, knowledge and competences. For example, currently an enterprise in Ireland may hesitate to recruit a job applicant from Hungary because it doesn't understand his or her qualifications. But once the EQF is implemented, Hungarian certificates would carry an EQF reference e.g. "EQF level 5", allowing Irish employers to more readily interpret the level of such qualifications.

### **What are learning outcomes and why does the EQF use them?**

Learning outcomes are what a learner knows, understands and is able to do after a course of learning, as opposed to learning inputs such as the length of a learning experience or the type of institution etc.

The EQF uses learning outcomes - defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences – because only this basis would enable it to connect the different national systems. An inputs basis could not accommodate the great diversity in Europe's education systems, for example the duration of training courses varies significantly between countries.

### **What levels and what types of education does the EQF cover?**

The EQF is a lifelong learning framework, applying to qualifications obtained in all sectors of education, including general education, higher education and vocational training. Its core is its eight reference levels of qualifications, from those obtained at the end of compulsory education, (level 1) to the highest (level 8: doctorate or equivalent). The three highest levels correspond to higher education levels as defined within the European Higher Education Area, or to highly specialised professional qualifications.

### **How can the EQF promote lifelong learning?**

Most countries are already developing *national* qualifications frameworks (NQFs) which will be linked to the EQF. This is a relatively recent development – currently, only the UK, Ireland, France and Malta have NQFs. The fact that the number of NQFs is growing demonstrates that countries recognise their advantages – in particular in lifelong learning, including facilitating the recognition of non-formal learning, for example skills acquired at work but not formally certified.

### **Does the EQF award qualifications?**

No, the EQF describes levels of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. The awarding of qualifications will remain a matter for national qualifications and other bodies.

### **How can the EQF benefit industry and commerce?**

The EQF will support labour market mobility in Europe both between and within countries and sectors by simplifying comparisons between qualifications and enabling a better match between supply and demand for knowledge, skills and competences. For employers, the EQF will make it easier to interpret the qualifications of foreign applicants. In particular, once qualifications bear a reference to the EQF, this will make qualifications more understandable.

The social partners (employers and trades unions) have been involved in developing the EQF from its earliest stages. In particular, social partner representatives helped draft the descriptors for the 8 reference levels.

Additionally, the EQF aims to facilitate the development of sectoral frameworks and qualifications, which reflects the growing internationalisation of qualifications.

### **What is the relationship between the EQF and the Bologna process in higher education?**

The EQF's four highest levels correspond to higher education levels as defined within the European Higher Education Area: EQF level 5 corresponds to the descriptor developed for the higher education short cycle, EQF level 6 to the descriptor developed for the first cycle (Bachelor level), EQF level 7 to the descriptor developed for the second cycle (Masters level) and EQF level 8 to the descriptor developed for the third cycle (PhD level).

However, the EQF is an overarching lifelong learning framework, incorporating vocational and other qualifications as well as more academic qualifications.

### **What is the relationship with “Europass”?**

Europass introduced a portfolio of documents to be used by individuals to describe their qualifications and competences. Europass does not, however, ensure the comparability of *levels* of qualifications. The further development of Europass will need to reflect the establishment of the EQF. In the future, all relevant Europass documents, in particular the Europass diploma supplement and the Europass certificate supplement, should contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.