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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**EVALUATION**

*of the*

**Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework  
for lifelong learning**

{SWD(2024) 142 final}

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## Glossary

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
<b>ACQF</b>	African Continental Qualifications Framework
<b>AG</b>	Advisory Group
<b>AL</b>	Albania
<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>CY</b>	Cyprus
<b>CZ</b>	Czechia
<b>DE</b>	Germany
<b>DK</b>	Denmark
<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>EFTA</b>	European Free Trade Association
<b>EHEA</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>EL</b>	Greece
<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>ESCO</b>	European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications
<b>ESF+</b>	European Social Fund Plus
<b>ETF</b>	Education and Training Foundation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUR</b>	euro (currency)
<b>FI</b>	Finland
<b>FR</b>	France
<b>FTE</b>	full-time equivalent
<b>HE</b>	higher education
<b>HR</b>	Croatia
<b>HU</b>	Hungary
<b>IE</b>	Ireland
<b>IS</b>	Iceland
<b>IT</b>	Italy
<b>LI</b>	Liechtenstein
<b>LOQ</b>	learning opportunities and qualifications
<b>LT</b>	Lithuania
<b>LU</b>	Luxembourg
<b>LV</b>	Latvia
<b>ME</b>	Montenegro
<b>MK</b>	North Macedonia
<b>MS</b>	Member States
<b>MT</b>	Malta
<b>EQF NCP</b>	EQF National Coordination Point
<b>NE</b>	northeast
<b>NFQ</b>	National Framework of Qualifications
<b>NL</b>	Netherlands
<b>NO</b>	Norway

<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<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>QDR</b>	Qualifications Dataset Register
<b>RO</b>	Romania
<b>RQF</b>	regional qualifications framework
<b>RS</b>	Serbia
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SADCQF</b>	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
<b>SE</b>	Sweden
<b>SI</b>	Slovenia
<b>SK</b>	Slovakia
<b>TR</b>	Türkiye
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>VET</b>	vocational education and training
<b>XK</b>	Kosovo <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</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

### Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The **Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning**<sup>2</sup> ("2017 EQF Recommendation") includes specific recommendations for the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework ("EQF") – an EU transparency tool that facilitates the understanding of qualifications acquired in different settings and countries. The 2017 EQF Recommendation strengthens the implementation framework for the EQF, including key principles, actions to be taken by the different actors, and governance structure. It does so by building on the 2008 EQF Recommendation,<sup>3</sup> which first established the EQF.

This document evaluates progress in relation to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, adopted on the basis of Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on education and vocational training. Evaluating the implementation and impact of European Union (EU) legislation is a basic requirement of the European Commission Better Regulation framework. The 2017 EQF Recommendation asks the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and after consulting stakeholders concerned, to assess and evaluate action taken and **report to the Council**.

The results of the evaluation will feed into a policy debate about the current and future role of the EQF in facilitating the transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications, and thus contributing to the objectives of the European Year of Skills, and in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and its action plan, in particular the achievement of the 2030 headline targets of 78% employment rate and 60% of adults participating in learning every year.

More concretely, findings on implementation progress and efficiency will be used to improve the implementation of the EQF, if needed, by pointing out what works well and what needs further attention. Conclusions on the effects and impacts of the EQF will be used to further strengthen its positive effects, by showing how the EQF works in practice and what factors influence its effectiveness. Results on the importance of the EQF to different groups and its interaction with other instruments will help address overlaps and enhance synergies. Indeed, combined with the results of the 2023 evaluation of the revised

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<sup>2</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, OJ C 189 of 15.6.2017.

<sup>3</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

Europass framework,<sup>4</sup> the conclusions of both exercises provide thorough insights into the role of EU transparency tools and services for skills and qualifications. This comprehensive analysis allows to take stock of overall progress in the domain, identifying the effects of EU action beyond individual transparency tools and services and showing how EU tools support all steps of an individual's learning and working journey. It also provides the ground for a strategic discussion on possible areas of future common endeavours.

The evaluation assesses developments in the period from 1 June 2017 to 1 June 2022, covering the 38<sup>5</sup> countries involved in the EQF process. This includes 27 EU Member States and the United Kingdom until 1 February 2020, four EFTA countries, five candidate and two potential candidate countries. Given its federal structure and national arrangements, Belgium's three regions are represented separately.<sup>6</sup> The 2017 EQF Recommendation is formally addressed to EU Member States only, but its implementation concerns all non-EU countries that participate in the EQF process. The evaluation covers both groups to a similar extent to draw comprehensive conclusions about the EQF that reflect its implementation in practice. Differences between EU and non-EU EQF countries are highlighted, where relevant.

In compliance with the Better Regulation Guidelines, the evaluation assesses the following criteria:

- **effectiveness:** to what extent the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation have been achieved through action by Member States, the Commission alone and the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders within the EQF Advisory Group (hereafter “EQF AG”);
- **efficiency:** relationship between costs and benefits, relevant factors and proportionality of costs;
- **coherence:** whether the 2017 EQF Recommendation is coherent internally and with other EU and national initiatives;

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation 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, SWD(2024) 71.

<sup>5</sup> EQF countries: 27 EU MS, 4 EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland), 5 candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Türkiye), and 2 potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo). 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.

<sup>6</sup> As a result, 38 countries participate in the EQF process, representing 40 National Qualifications Frameworks.



- **EU added value:** whether the 2017 EQF Recommendation has generated additional value compared to what action at national level alone would have produced;
- **relevance:** whether the 2017 EQF Recommendation objectives and the measures recommended to achieve them are still relevant.

The evaluation is based on a **mixed-method data collection approach** supported by an external study (“supporting study”).<sup>7</sup> It combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, triangulating evidence from desk research and literature review with stakeholder views, collected via interviews, targeted online survey, public consultation (“PC”) and validation workshop. The stakeholder consultation involved international and national actors, including public authorities, education and training providers, social partners, EQF end users (workers, learners, employers) and the broader public.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation builds on the elements first introduced with 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 (“2008 EQF Recommendation”). Thus, effects and impacts of the EQF in the evaluation period cannot always be attributed solely to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, but should be understood as a continuation and consolidation of the achievements of the 2008 EQF Recommendation. Furthermore, the functioning of the EQF as reference framework depends on the implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks (“NQFs”). These are considered in the evaluation, where relevant and feasible. More specifically, the use of case studies with detailed overview of national particularities and NQFs of 15 countries served as a basis to draw overarching conclusions.

Understanding the EQF requires a good knowledge of qualifications and qualification systems. Thus, it is expected that only a limited number of informed experts and stakeholders can provide in-depth feedback. Such in-depth feedback was triangulated with the perceptions of a broader range of stakeholders on less technical questions to ensure robust findings. Stakeholder perceptions were also used in the cost-benefit analysis of the 2017 EQF Recommendation as it was not possible to quantify benefits due to data limitations and the multitude of factors beyond the 2017 EQF Recommendation which may have influenced trends in relevant indicators.

See Annex II for further details on the evaluation methodology, its limitations and mitigation measures.

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<sup>7</sup> Visionary Analytics & Ockham IPS (2024), Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

## 2. WHAT WAS THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE INTERVENTION?

### 2.1 Description of the intervention and its objectives

#### Rationale

Qualifications play an important role in employability, mobility and access to further education and learning. They allow employers, learners, education and training providers and recognition bodies to better understand what a qualification holder knows and can do. Thus, **qualifications support the visibility and transparency of citizen's skills and knowledge**. This encourages individuals to acquire new and broader skillsets, facilitates the match between the supply of skills and the needs of the labour market, and supports the free movement of workers and learners.

However, **national education and training systems differ, making it difficult to compare qualifications** across countries and sectors. This limits the possibility to judge the quality and content of qualifications acquired in another country or outside the formal system, and as a result creates barriers to worker's and learner's mobility, within and between borders.

Against this background, the 2008 EQF Recommendation established the EQF as a common reference framework of eight levels of qualifications expressed in learning outcomes<sup>8</sup>, which serves as a 'translation grid' between national qualifications systems. Despite implementation progress of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, **its objectives were not fully achieved**, mainly due to limitations of the Recommendation itself,<sup>9</sup> but also because its full implementation required time-intensive changes at national level.

Recognising the **persisting challenge of limited transparency**, one of the three key work strands of the 2016 Skills Agenda<sup>10</sup> was to make "*skills and qualifications more visible and comparable*", also by giving new impetus to the EQF to reach individuals and organisations and to improve the understanding of qualifications acquired abroad. To **address identified limitations of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, and to consolidate and further develop the EQF**, the 2017 EQF Recommendation was adopted, repealing its 2008 predecessor.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Learning outcomes' means statements regarding what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy.

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is based on the assessments conducted by the European Parliament (Panteia (2012), State of Play of the European Qualifications Framework implementation) and the European Commission (ICF GHK (2013), External study "Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation").

<sup>10</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions [A New Skills Agenda For Europe](#) working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness, COM(2016) 381 final.

## Objectives

Beyond strengthening the principles and implementation of the EQF as a whole and building on the 2008 EQF Recommendation, the **wider objectives** of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are to **contribute to modernising education and training systems** and to **increase the employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners**. It aims to do so indirectly via the progress achieved towards its two **specific objectives**:

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

## Recommendations

To reach these objectives, the 2017 EQF Recommendation relies on 18 recommendations either to Member States, to the EQF Advisory Group (Commission in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders) or the European Commission separately. Some provisions are a continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation or codify existing practice, whilst others introduce new elements or refine existing guidance, thus leading to changes.<sup>11</sup> Observable effects in the evaluation period are expected mainly in refined and new provisions.

The 18 recommendations can be grouped in five thematic areas. First, **strengthened implementation of the EQF**, recommending to reference and update the referencing of National Qualifications Frameworks to the EQF, to support the use of learning outcomes and to explore comparisons with third country frameworks. Second, **encouraging links with all types and forms of qualifications**, more specifically looking into including qualifications outside the formal sector in national qualifications frameworks and into the levelling of international qualifications. Third, linking **common principles for quality assurance** (“QA”) and **credit systems to qualifications** with an EQF level. Fourth, **increased outreach and use of the EQF**, by providing information on EQF levels on qualification documents, qualification databases and registers, ensuring that information on the content of qualifications is accessible, encouraging the use of the EQF by relevant stakeholders.

The fifth category deals with the **governance of the EQF**. The EQF Advisory Group consists of the Commission, Cedefop, ETF, Council of Europe, national representatives and stakeholders, and governs the consistent implementation of the EQF. In addition, EQF

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Codifying existing practice’ entails the inclusion of existing practice in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, therefore not resulting in visible changes in practice. ‘Refining existing guidance’ is understood to imply change of practices, which may be small or more substantial, but are at least visible in comparison to the pre 2017 period.

National Coordination Points (“NCPs”), receiving EU funds via Erasmus+, support national authorities and inform stakeholders about the EQF.

*Table 1 – Individual recommendations per theme of the 2017 EQF Recommendation*

Sub-theme	2017 EQF Recommendation	Comparison to 2008
<b>Strengthening the implementation of the EQF</b>		
<b>Referencing</b>	MS1a. Use the EQF to reference NQFs, by referencing to EQF levels from Annex II and by using the criteria from Annex III	Codify existing practice
<b>Referencing update</b>	MS2. Review and update the referencing of the levels of the NQF to the levels of the EQF	Codify existing practice
<b>Supporting the use of learning outcomes</b>	EC/AG9. Compare and discuss methodologies used for the levelling of qualifications in NQFs	Codify existing practice
	EC/AG10. Support the development of methodologies for the description, use and application of learning outcomes	Continuation
<b>Links to third country QF</b>	EC/AG13. Explore development and application of criteria and procedures to enable the comparison with third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks	New
<b>Encouraging the links between formal, non-formal and informal learning</b>		
<b>Qualifications outside the formal domain</b>	MS1b. Compare all types and levels of qualifications that are part of NQF	Codify existing practice
<b>International qualifications</b>	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	Refinement
<b>Linking common principles for quality assurance and credit systems to qualifications with an EQF level</b>		
<b>References to quality assurance</b>	MS3. Ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV	Refinement
<b>Links of credit systems</b>	MS4. Promote links between credit systems and NQF taking into account the common principles on credit systems from Annex V	Codify existing practice
<b>Increasing the outreach of NQF / EQF to different stakeholders</b>		
<b>Information on the levels of qualifications</b>	MS5. Take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents and/or registers of qualifications contain a reference to EQF level	Codify existing practice
	EC/AG12. Develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued	Codify existing practice

Sub-theme	2017 EQF Recommendation	Comparison to 2008
	qualification documents, and/or registers of qualifications	
<b>Information on qualification content</b>	MS6b. Ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published, using the data fields set out in Annex VI	Refinement
<b>Information on NQF</b>	MS6a. Make the results of the referencing process publicly available at national and Union levels	Refinement
<b>Use by stakeholders</b>	MS7. Encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities	Continuation
<b>Governance / Implementation</b>		
<b>Advisory Group</b>	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	Continuation
	EC/AG14. Set up peer learning and best practice exchanges between the Member States and, where appropriate, facilitate peer counselling	Continuation
<b>Funds</b>	EC/AG15. Ensure that the implementation of this recommendation is supported through actions funded by relevant Union programmes	Continuation
<b>Monitoring and evaluation</b>	EC17. Report on progress	Continuation
	EC18. Assess and evaluate action taken in response to this Recommendation	Continuation

## 2.2 Points of comparison (2017)

Indicators that allow to describe the situation in 2017 focus on **policy measures to support the transparency and visibility of skills and knowledge**. More specifically, the implementation status of the recommendations of the 2017 EQF Recommendation provides a point of comparison. Based on a country mapping, these were identified per thematic area for the year 2017 (see Figure 1 on page 9).

First, with regard to **implementation of the EQF in 2017**, **34 out of 40 NQFs had been referenced to the EQF**: 26 EU NQFs from 25 countries (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) and 8 non-EU (CH, IS, LI, ME, MK, NO, TR, XK). **Three had updated their referencing** (BE (nl), EE, MT). Two handbooks, a Peer Learning Activity (“PLA”) and one project group supported the consistent use of learning outcomes. Despite an increased overall use of learning outcomes, evidence also shows remaining **differences in country**

**interpretations of the learning outcomes principle** and while the use of learning outcomes in vocational education and training (“VET”) is well documented<sup>12</sup>, there is less evidence about other education sectors, particularly in general education<sup>13</sup>. **Exploratory work on the comparison with third country qualifications frameworks had taken place, including three pilot comparison projects**, without an institutionalised approach.

Second, with regard to **links with all types and forms of qualifications in 2017**, **nine countries included qualifications outside formal education in their NQFs in 2017**: 8 EU (DK, FR, MT, NL, PL, SE, SI, SK) and 1 non-EU (XK).<sup>14</sup> **No procedure for information exchange on the levelling of international qualifications** was in place and work on the topic within the EQF AG was exploratory, including pilot projects that reviewed the experiences when using the EQF for specific sectoral qualifications and a sub-group on International Sectoral Qualifications in 2014.

Third, with regard to **common principles for quality assurance in 2017**, it should be noted that national QA systems tend to be structured by sub-systems, leading to fragmentation. As a result, QA processes and principles are not easily reported and compared<sup>15</sup> and no European-wide overview of QA criteria in different education sectors and countries can be provided<sup>16</sup>. However, a literature review shows general trends: **common QA principles were widely implemented in VET and Higher Education**<sup>17</sup>, **QA systems in general education differed, and were not sufficiently consolidated**<sup>18</sup>, and **QA systems in the non-formal domain were not consistently in place**<sup>19</sup>. With regard

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<sup>12</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>13</sup> European Commission (2016), A new Skills Agenda for Europe: Annex III Revision of the EQF, [SWD\(2016\), 195 final](#), page 6.

<sup>14</sup> Visionary Analytics & Ockham IPS (2024), Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, p. 49 based on Cedefop (2019) NQF developments in European countries.

<sup>15</sup> European Union (2013), [Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF](#) (Note 5).

<sup>16</sup> Conclusion of the EQF AG horizontal comparisons working group, which underlined the high diversity of QA mechanisms and stakeholders involved when looking at EQF levels 4 through 6.

<sup>17</sup> VET: European Commission (2019), Study on EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET). HE: European Association for Quality Assurance in HE (2011), [Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG](#) (MAP-ESG Project), Brussels.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission (2015), [Comparative study on quality assurance in EU school education systems: policies, procedures and practices](#), Publications Office, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Panteia (2013), [Developing the adult learning sector Quality in the Adult Learning Sector](#) (Lot 1), p. 28.



to **common principles for credit systems**, in 2017, **around half of all EQF countries linked credit systems in specific education sectors** to their NQFs when completing the referencing exercise: 14 for VET (10 EU: BG, HR, EE, FI, FR, IE, LU, MT, PT, SI; 4 non-EU: IS, MK, ME, XK) and 20 NQFs from 20 countries for HE (14 NQF EU: BE (nl), BE (fr), BG, HR, DK, EE, FI, FR, IE, LV, LU, MT, SI, SK; 6 non-EU: IS, LI, MK, ME, NO, XK). No overview is available for general education and the non-formal domain.<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, the **outreach and use of the EQF in 2017** can be compared by looking at the availability of relevant EQF information and the level of awareness of different stakeholders. Starting with the first element, in 2017, **19 EQF countries indicated EQF levels on qualifications documents** (15 EU: CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK; 4 non-EU: CH, IS, MK, NO) and **15 did so in qualifications registers and databases** (13 EU: CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FR, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI; 2 non-EU: CH, MK). In addition, **five EU EQF countries linked national databases to the European level**, thus publishing information on qualifications through a common European interface and using a set of agreed data fields: BE (nl), EL, IE, LT, SI. No information is available on the number of **referencing reports available online** in 2017.<sup>21</sup> No indicators from 2017 are available for the second element, level of awareness, but evidence from 2013 shows that **despite communication efforts, the visibility of the EQF was relatively low among stakeholders**<sup>22</sup>, underlined as a valid observation in EQF AG discussions in 2017.<sup>23</sup>

Fifth, the **governance of the EQF**: the EQF AG and EQF NCPs, were already in place in 2017, having been established further to the 2008 Recommendation. Already the 2013 assessment of the EQF governance concluded that the EQF AG fulfils its role, providing an effective way to ensure networking, peer learning and exchange of experience. It also found that NCPs implement their tasks in an effective way, and are perceived as a single point of contact.<sup>24</sup>

The status of implementation in 2017 was chosen as a comparison point for the evaluation because no quantitative indicators exist that capture the level of transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications in 2017. Furthermore, the direct comparison of employability, mobility and adult learning indicators is not telling in the context of the evaluation, since they are influenced by a number of other policies and the 2017 EQF Recommendation could impact these only indirectly, due to a lack of causal relationship.

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<sup>20</sup> Based on Cedefop series on national qualifications framework developments in European countries (2017).

<sup>21</sup> The ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#), page 11 shows that in 2013 70% of the results of the referencing process (reports) were available online (11 out of the 16)

<sup>22</sup> ICF GHK (2013), [Evaluation of the Implementation of the EQF Recommendation](#), page 33.

<sup>23</sup> AG 41-3 “Note for discussing the future implementation of the EQF Recommendation”

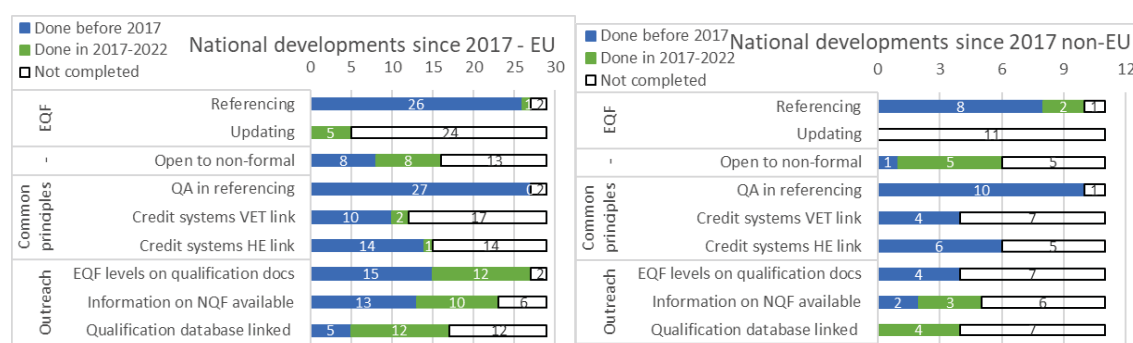
<sup>24</sup> ICF GHK (2013), External study “Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation”, page 40.

However, these indicators provide a broader context for the rationale of the EQF. In 2017, the EU employment rate was 70.9%.<sup>25</sup> 12.5 million EU-28 citizens of working age were living in another EU-28 Member State, and 16 million third country nationals in the EU-28 and EFTA countries.<sup>26</sup> The EU average adult learning participation rate over the previous four weeks was 10.4%.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. HOW HAS THE SITUATION EVOLVED OVER THE EVALUATION PERIOD?

Figure 1 illustrates developments per thematic area since 2017. It shows an increase in the number of EQF countries implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation for each aspect. No direct practical changes are observed only in relation to the provision on quality assurance. The most significant developments are observed in the area of outreach, followed by measures to strengthen the implementation of the EQF. This pattern is in line with the scope of change introduced in 2017 and the scope for further action: 15 out of the 20<sup>28</sup> recommendations in Table 1 are a continuation of the 2008 EQF Recommendation or codify existing practice, and thus were being implemented before 2017. Therefore, the expectations for additional developments since 2017 on these recommendations were limited as they had been implemented to a large extent already in 2017, such as links to common QA principles and initial referencing.

Figure 1 – National developments on key aspects of the 2018 EQF Recommendation (EU / Non-EU)



The following provides more detailed information on changes at national and European level since 2017 for each recommendation:

- **Implementation of the EQF:** At national level, three of the remaining six countries **referenced** to the EQF (RO, RS, AL). Five EQF countries (FR, IE, IT, LV, NL) and the three QF in the UK **updated their referencing**. The updates were a response to national legislative and institutional developments.

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat, Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data, Online data code: [LFSI\\_EMP\\_A](#)

<sup>26</sup> European Commission (2019) [2018 Annual Report on intra-EU Labour Mobility – Final Report](#)

<sup>27</sup> Eurostat, Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks by sex, Online data code: [SDG\\_04\\_60](#)

<sup>28</sup> While the 2017 EQF Recommendation includes 18 recommendations, some of them have been divided in two parts to allow for more in-depth analysis. Thus, the SWD evaluation refers to 20 recommendations.



At European level, cooperation to promote the **consistent use of learning outcomes** was supported by two project groups<sup>29</sup>, a PLA<sup>30</sup>, and conceptual work<sup>31</sup>. In addition to continued efforts to support the definition and writing of learning outcomes and to ensure the quality and consistency of levelling of national qualifications, work since 2017 focused on ways in which learning outcomes could be used to provide accessible information on the content and profile of qualifications. This includes work towards a consistent approach to the synthetic description of learning outcomes and their presentation in databases and registers and the linking of learning outcomes descriptors to standardised skills terminology of the European classification of skills and occupations (ESCO).

At national level, four MS (EE, FR, IE, LV) indicated in 2022 to be exploring comparability of their NQF with third country frameworks, beyond the EQF structures.<sup>32</sup> At European level, a project group developed a proposal for procedures, criteria and topics for **comparisons between the EQF and third country national or regional qualifications frameworks**, which resulted in a completed comparison with Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> An ETF study mapped regional qualifications framework initiatives<sup>34</sup>.

- **Links with all types and forms of qualifications:** At national level, 13 EQF countries included **qualifications outside the formal domain in national frameworks** (8 EU<sup>35</sup>: AT, BE (nl), CY, CZ, EE, FI, HU, IE; 5 non-EU: AL, ME, MK, RS, TR), bringing the total number to 22 out of 38 EQF countries. It should be noted that some countries are piloting and working towards a legal or institutional framework for the inclusion of qualifications outside the formal domain (DE, ES, EL, BiH), and in some instances, this is possible via validation procedures (RO).<sup>36</sup> At European level, a PLA was organised in 2018 on existing and planned procedures for including qualifications

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<sup>29</sup> In 2018: Project group on Horizontal Comparisons to gain systematic insight into the use of the learning outcomes principle to level national qualifications; In 2021: Project group on short descriptions of learning outcomes to develop and test guidelines on the consistent drafting of short descriptions of learning outcomes

<sup>30</sup> PLA in 2018 to discuss intended and achieved learning outcomes

<sup>31</sup> Cedefop (2022), [Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes. A European handbook – second edition](#)

<sup>32</sup> Overview based on Cedefop and ETF [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#). Data from 2020 used for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

<sup>33</sup> [Final report on comparison pilot with Ukraine](#) published in 2023.

<sup>34</sup> European Training Foundation (2021), [Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020](#).

<sup>35</sup> Overview based on Cedefop and ETF [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#).

<sup>36</sup> Based on Cedefop and ETF [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#). Data from 2020 used for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

outside the formal domain in NQFs. In addition, discussions in the EQF AG show increasing interest on the topic of micro-credentials.

Since 2017, a project group at European level prepared a draft voluntary procedure on **the levelling of international qualifications** and the information exchange between countries, discussed in a PLA in 2022, and currently being implemented through an ad hoc group.

- **Linking common principles for QA and credit systems:** All EQF countries continue to have **quality assured** qualifications in their NQFs because quality assurance forms an integral part of the EQF referencing process. QA remained a key discussion point in the update of referencing reports since 2017. However, there is no evidence pointing at changes in the practical implementation of QA at national level since 2017, also due to the lack of a comprehensive overview of QA approaches in all education and training sectors.

At national level, two countries took action to relate **credit systems** to NQFs (NL for all qualifications, LT for VET), bringing the total number for HE to 15 and for VET to 16.

- **Increasing the outreach of NQF / EQF to different stakeholders:** At national level, 12 NQFs from 11 EU countries (AT, BE (nl), BE (fr), BG, CY, FI, HR, LU, NL, PL, RO, SE) and four non-EU (IS, ME, RS, TR) took measures to include **EQF levels on qualification documents**, leading to a total of 35. Additional 13 NQFs (9 EU countries: AT, BE (nl), BE (fr), CY, HR, HU, IE, RO, SK, SE; 3 non-EU: IS, RS, TR) included **EQF levels in qualifications registers**, leading to a total of 28. 16 additional countries (12 EU: BE (fr), CZ, DE, EE, EL, HU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SE; 4 non-EU: IS, NO, RS, TR) **linked national databases to the European level (via the Europass platform)**, leading to a total of 21. With regard to **availability of information**, 33 out of 37 referencing reports are available online (89%) and online platforms have been further developed to provide information to the broader public. The Europass platform established in 2020 is the official platform for information on the EQF<sup>37</sup> and includes the repository of qualifications and learning opportunities at the European level. The renewed Cedefop webportal includes the newly developed ‘European Inventory of NQF’ and the ETF portal includes country fiches of non-EU EQF countries. Communication efforts **encouraging the use of NQF / EQF among stakeholders** have also taken place at national level (NCPs reach out to experts via seminars, conferences, handbooks, and brochures, and target the general public via NQF websites, qualifications databases and social media channels) and at European level (10 Year Anniversary Conference; PLA on communication in 2022).
- The **governance of the EQF** continued the practices established in 2017, including work within the EQF Advisory Group and with National Coordination Points. Two

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<sup>37</sup> The Europass platform was set up further to the Europass Decision of 2 May 2018, and integrated the different constituent parts of the former Learning Opportunities and Qualifications portal (LOQ).

main developments are observed in the period. First, the organisation of online EQF AG and project group meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the introduction of an online platform for exchange between EQF AG members and NCPs in 2022.

As outlined in section **Error! Reference source not found.**, employment rate, mobility and adult learning indicators allow to place the EQF in a broader context. Since 2017, the EU employment rate increased with 3.7 p.p. (from 70.9% to 74.6%).<sup>38</sup> In 2021, there were approximately 10.2 million working age EU movers and 16.8 million third-country nationals.<sup>39</sup> A direct comparison of the absolute numbers with 2017 is not possible, as 2017 data includes the UK in the category of “EU movers”. However, trends indicate that throughout 2016-2021, the stock of EU movers increased by 5.2%, and third-country nationals by 28%.<sup>40</sup> In 2022, the EU average adult learning participation rate over the past four weeks was 11.9%, representing an increase of 1.4 p.p. compared to 2017.<sup>41</sup>

## 4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

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

The analyses suggest the 2017 EQF Recommendation was successful to a large extent. The implementation of the EQF continued in an efficient manner, in the sense that its benefits clearly outweigh its costs. While the 2017 EQF Recommendation clearly supports increased transparency of qualifications among EQF countries, it still has not realised its full practical value to the wider public, and in relation to qualifications outside the formal domain and third country qualifications frameworks. At the same time, the EQF supports the implementation of numerous EU and national policies, being fully coherent with them.

#### Effectiveness

##### **Effectiveness of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation**

The **implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation is judged as effective to a large extent** since the level of implementation is in line with expectations (section 3) and the evidence points at positive effects per recommendation. More specifically, most recommendations have been implemented by Member States and other EQF countries. Progress was achieved in relation to all provisions, and the most in relation to outreach and accessibility of information. While no practical change was identified in relation to quality assurance principles, these have continued to be an important pillar of the referencing process.

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<sup>38</sup> Eurostat, Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data, Online data code: [LFSI\\_EMP\\_A](#)

<sup>39</sup> Data is not yet available for 2022.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission (2023) [Annual report on intra-EU labour mobility 2022](#).

<sup>41</sup> Eurostat, Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks by sex, Online data code: [SDG\\_04\\_60](#)

The gathered evidence allows to draw conclusions on the extent of implementation, experiences, and effectiveness per recommendation<sup>42</sup> to the Member States.

### Implementation of the EQF

The **referencing process** is completed to an almost full extent, with three countries remaining unreferenced due to national factors, but in the process of completing their referencing.<sup>43</sup> Even if time-intensive, the referencing process is perceived by EQF AG members as a valuable opportunity to reflect on the NQF systematically in a European context, to engage with relevant national stakeholders at both national and European level and as a necessary condition of transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications. At the same time, EQF AG members also stress that the level of achieved transparency depends on the implementation of NQFs in practice, which sometimes faces obstacles (e.g. limitations to the levelling methods, insufficient trust in levelled qualifications, inconsistent descriptions of qualifications).

The six **updates to referencing** since 2017 fall within the scope of expectation as most NQFs had completed the initial referencing process within a period of ten years, which is a short timeframe for substantial changes in education and training systems. Thus, the provision is judged as adequately implemented. The positive effects of updating are similar to those of the initial referencing: increasing the international comparability and transparency, but also stimulating national level reflections on the national qualifications systems, as indicated by EQF AG members from FR, NL and IE who were involved in the updated referencing.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation has **successfully continued to support the use of learning outcomes** in describing qualifications. More specifically, gathered evidence points at the extension of learning outcomes across education and training sub-sectors. The majority of survey respondents, mainly public authorities, see an increased use of learning outcomes (77%, 91 out of 119) compared to 2017, corroborated with examples from the case studies on how the EQF and the referencing process increased the focus on learning outcomes at national level (e.g. in DE, FI, SI, RS). Looking at the effect of this increased use of learning outcomes, the majority of 121 survey respondents, including public authorities, education and training providers and end beneficiaries, agree that the current use of learning outcomes improves understanding and comparability of qualifications within their own country (67%, 80 out of 119), and across countries (60%, 71 out of 119). At the same time, interviews with national stakeholders (e.g. in IE, DE, SI), discussions in

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<sup>42</sup> To avoid repetition, recommendation 8 “Ensure the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF NCP” is discussed under “efficiency” as it allows to relate costs and benefits.

<sup>43</sup> National factors hindering the referencing ES: large number of qualifications; regional differences; BE(de): finalisation of arrangements of validation pending; BiH: federal structure with restricted mandates of competent authorities.

the EQF AG<sup>44</sup> and conceptual work<sup>45</sup> point that differences in the descriptions of learning outcomes and the format of their publication could be hindering the comparisons of qualifications.

#### Links with all types of qualifications

NQFs have **increased their scope and coverage to some extent**, as the number of NQFs that include qualifications outside the formal domain has increased (see section 3). Differences in progress could be explained with the stage of NQF development, as qualifications outside the formal domain tend to be included in NQFs at an operational stage.<sup>46</sup> Consultations with national authorities in the case studies also highlight national differences, especially on the EQF role in the process. In some instances, the EQF helps align existing reforms (IE, FR, NL), in others it creates a momentum for such reforms (PL, RS). However, despite progress, 16 EQF countries still have NQFs that are not open to qualifications outside the formal domain. This could impact the level of their understanding, shown in the PC results – 94% of consulted citizens, local and national authorities (136 of 145) believe it likely or very likely for a qualification from the formal domain to be recognised in another country, compared to 29% (42 of 145) for qualifications awarded outside the formal system.

Beyond the inclusion of qualifications outside the formal domain in NQFs, **validation arrangements create links between different types of qualifications**. The links between the EQF and the process of validation are explored in the section on “Coherence”. The evaluation did not explore how validation is used in NQFs, as such an analysis is beyond the evaluation scope and already addressed in the 2020 evaluation of “Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning”. The evaluation observed that “if validation arrangements are properly linked to NQFs aligned to the EQF, then validation leads to qualifications, or parts of them, which are easier to understand and compare across Europe.”<sup>47</sup>

A voluntary procedure at EU level on the **levelling of international qualifications and information exchange** has been designed, but is still being tested in practice. Thus, the provision has been implemented to some extent, and it is too early to judge on effects achieved.

#### Linking common principles for QA and credit systems

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<sup>44</sup> For example see note EQF AG 58-4 “EQF AG work plan 2000 – 2022”, Fiche A and Fiche D.

<sup>45</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>

<sup>46</sup> Cedefop and ETF (2023) [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#).

<sup>47</sup> European Commission (2020), [Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), SWD(2020) 121 final.

The provisions on **quality assurance** ensured that QA remains an important element of the referencing process and in line with discussions at national level, especially related to the quality assurance of qualifications outside the formal domain. There is no evidence gathered on observable changes in national quality assurance principles, also due to the complexity of quality assurance approaches at national level. However, the EQF is perceived to generally contribute to trust in the quality of a qualification (through recommendation 3, referencing criteria 5 and 6, Annex IV). This is highlighted in specific case studies in DE, NL, SI and agreed by 67% (69 out of 104) of survey respondents, with no differences across stakeholder type. Thus, the provision is judged as sufficiently implemented.

The changes in two countries (NL, LT) linked to **credit systems** fall within the scope of expectation, as the recommendation was broadly formulated to reflect the situation in 2017 and its implementation was expected only when deemed relevant in the national context. Indeed, a case study on the topic showed that national approaches to credit systems of EQF countries are aligned with the principles set out in Annex V.<sup>48</sup> And the 2020 NQF Inventory identifies examples in which links to credit systems could lead to more flexible learning pathways as they increase modularisation of qualifications (in e.g. in BE (fr)<sup>49</sup>, EE,<sup>50</sup> FR<sup>51</sup>). This is also supported by 56% (58 out of 104) of survey respondents, especially public authorities. However, the overall effects of the provision are deemed relatively ineffective, as the recommendation itself is not sufficient to spark structural national education and training reforms.

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

Since 2017, there was significant progress in implementing **EQF levels on qualification documents and improving the availability of information on NQF**, as outlined in section 3. All 26 Member States having referenced to the EQF provide EQF levels on qualification documents, and more than half Member States (17) have linked national databases and registers to the Europass platform, with further 7 already preparing for it.<sup>52</sup> The Europass platform offers an online tool to compare NQFs through the EQF<sup>53</sup>, and EQF and NQF levels are present in all Europass documents, where their use is further promoted. Given this progress, the recommendation is judged as implemented to a large extent in the

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<sup>48</sup> Examples of principles in the Annex V to which MS credit system were aligned to: Adoption of learning outcomes approach within credit systems: BE(nl); BE(fr); support of flexible pathways: LV; improved cooperation between stakeholders (IE).

<sup>49</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020 – Belgium](#).

<sup>50</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory on NQF 2020 – Estonia](#).

<sup>51</sup> Cedefop (2021). [European inventory of NQFs 2020 – France](#).

<sup>52</sup> Cedefop (2023) [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#). MS indicating plans: AT, CY, FI, HR, IT, RO, SK

<sup>53</sup> [Compare Qualifications | Europass](#)



evaluation timeframe. This constitutes a significant progress towards the goal of connecting all EQF countries to the Europass platform. Non-EU countries have shown less implementation progress (see Figure 1), which can be explained with their focus on more operational questions of referencing over the evaluation period.

As a result of this implementation progress, effects can be observed in terms of accessibility of information on qualifications and their learning outcomes. For example, the majority of survey respondents (56%, 64 out of 105), mainly public authorities and education and training providers, agree that information on the content of qualifications has improved since 2017. The results of the Europass evaluation<sup>54</sup> also point to a good level of satisfaction of stakeholders and users who use Europass to retrieve information about qualifications frameworks and the EQF. However, EQF AG discussions have also pointed to the fact that no further guidance exists for a structured presentation of learning outcomes and their short descriptions in databases and registers. To address this issue an EQF AG project group was set up in 2021 to develop guidelines for short descriptions of learning outcomes.

The actions to **encourage the use of the EQF** (via promotion of the NQF<sup>55</sup>) have increased since 2017. More countries indicate EQF levels on qualifications and in registers, and more countries have connected their database at the European level I, even if not all have done so yet. Several countries undertook communication actions. More specifically, NQF communication strategies are often in place (7 out of 10 countries indicate to have one), relying on a variety of communication channels, but mainly targeting the professional public. Even if three in five survey respondents agree that NQF communication campaigns mention the EQF, still two in five either disagree or do not know. In addition, national stakeholders consulted in Finland and Romania stress that communication takes place in an unstructured and sporadic manner, leading to the judgment that encouraging the use of the EQF has been implemented to some extent, with scope for further action.

Stakeholders perceive the technical nature of the EQF as a key implementation obstacle to encouraging its use, but a number of **operational factors also influence the effective implementation of communication and outreach** activities in practice: maturity of the NQF (e.g. added value to end users of operational NQFs can be better presented); definition of the target group (e.g. whether the broader public is targeted or the EQF is perceived as a technical tool reserved for stakeholders working with qualifications); messaging used (e.g. whether messages are tailored to the target group); implementation channel (e.g. whether communication synergies are explored with other labour market and education policies and tools).

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<sup>54</sup> Evaluation 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, SWD(2024) 140.

<sup>55</sup> Communication about the EQF happens through communication of the NQF because without a link to an NQF, an EQF level does not have practical meaning for end users.

Against the backdrop of these implementation challenges, stakeholder perceptions across all stakeholder groups indicate that communication efforts have not led to substantially higher levels of awareness among all target audiences. For example, while more than half of PC and survey respondents are aware of the EQF (from 65% to 84% depending on provision, see Annex V), this level is the lowest for holders (PC: 21 out of 42) or users (PC: 19 out of 33) of qualifications compared to those working with qualifications (PC: 51 out of 60). To further confirm this, only 33% (N= 1 557) of qualification holders on the Europass platform indicated to know their EQF level, and 53% (N=392) of employers that assess CVs did so. The observation that NQF awareness is high among education institutions and employers, but generally lower among the general public was also confirmed in DK, EL, IE, NL, SI, consulted in a case study. This is also confirmed by findings of the 2022 NQF Inventory that target groups with the highest levels of awareness are those that are using the NQFs/EQF in their daily work, such as education practitioners and employees in agencies/ organisations that are involved in the development and day-to-day running of the framework.<sup>56</sup>

### **Contribution to achieving the 2017 EQF Recommendation specific and wider objectives<sup>57</sup>**

The available evidence suggests that the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and corresponding communication efforts **contributed to a large extent to its specific objectives, continuing the process set in motion** with the 2008 EQF Recommendation.

Since 2017, the **EQF improved directly the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications within and between EQF countries**, agreed by a large majority of stakeholders consulted (83%, 101 out of 121 survey and 85%, 195 out of 229 PC). It did so by sparking national discussions and reflections, fostering exchange and cooperation between stakeholders, increasing understanding of other qualifications systems, supporting the increased use of the learning outcomes approach and facilitating comparisons. However, this impact is less evident for qualifications outside the formal domain, as reflected in Figure 1, and appears to be stronger in national contexts with recent NQF reforms, as indicated in national-level consultations. This could be attributed to limited awareness of the EQF among stakeholders in countries where no recent reform involving the EQF took place.

While no direct impact of the EQF on adult learning participation rates can be expected (see section 2.2), **the EQF indirectly facilitated lifelong learning**, as agreed by 70% (81 out of 116) of survey and 53% (123 out of 229) of PC respondents, but **did so to a small extent with more to be achieved**. More specifically, the EQF further reduced barriers to new types of qualifications, as 13 additional countries opened their NQFs to qualifications

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<sup>56</sup> Based on a preliminary analysis of the [European inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022](#), with a synthesis report forthcoming in 2024.

<sup>57</sup> The specific and wider objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation are defined in Recitals 3 and 4. Please see Figure 6 Intervention logic in Annex II for visual presentation.



outside the formal domain, but this is still not common practice. It also sparked NQF revisions which in turn facilitated lifelong learning, but mainly in countries with less mature NQFs. For instance, in Serbia, reforming the NQF has created an explicit link to a larger reform on lifelong learning, while in Poland such developments had been initiated before 2017, and since consisted of fine-tuning. Stakeholders in countries with mature NQFs (e.g. FR, NL, IE) do not perceive the 2017 EQF Recommendation as impacting lifelong learning policies, but as moving in the same direction as national reforms.

While the available **evidence does not allow to conclude a direct impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on its wider objectives**, given the lack of a direct causal link, the **stakeholder consultation confirmed its potential to do so**, especially via informing national qualifications reforms.

The **2017 EQF Recommendation has informed debates on modernisation of education and training systems**, indicated by national stakeholders in four out of five specific case study countries (DE, FI, FR, RS) and agreed by a large majority of survey respondents regardless of their stakeholder type (83% ,189 out of 229). More specifically, the country level consultation showed that the EQF approach has supported and inspired reforms of qualification systems of different maturity, linked to the use of learning outcomes in all education sectors (e.g. FI, RS) and new types of qualifications (e.g. DE, FR), which in turn inspired modularisation of qualifications and the validation of competences (e.g. DE, FR, RS).

The collected evidence **does not allow to conclude on a direct impact of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on employability, mobility, and social integration of learners and workers** because of the lack of a causal link. For example, while around half of stakeholders consulted online, without differences across stakeholder types, agree that the EQF contributes to mobility (58%, 71 out of 122 survey; 58% PC, 132 out of 229) and employability (46%, 57 out of 122 survey; 62%, 141 out of 229 PC), they face difficulties to assess this question and point at other driving factors (e.g. personal motivation, economic situation). At the same time, national stakeholders consulted in interviews identified mechanisms in which the EQF could be contributing to employability and mobility, such as the use of EQF/NQF levels to support recognition decisions, or easier recognition of learning outcomes achieved during study periods abroad which can have positive spill-over effects for labour markets. These however depend on NQFs being effectively used in practice. **The 2017 EQF Recommendation's contribution to social integration of workers and learners appears to be the less tangible** for consulted stakeholders (34%, 41 out of 122 survey; 45%, 103 out of 229 PC), but also possible, for example through improving guidance services with a more flexible approach to qualifications, as highlighted by case study stakeholders.

### **International dimension of the EQF and links to third countries**

The literature review of the external study points at an additional **broad positive impact: contributing to the development of qualifications frameworks and the use of learning outcomes beyond EQF countries** (e.g. African Continental Qualifications Framework -

ACQF).<sup>58</sup> International stakeholders and experts (including from UNESCO and ETF) indicated that the EQF is becoming a global standard in many respects and acts as a role model and catalyst for the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks across the globe (e.g. Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework - SADCQF and the Asean Qualifications Reference Framework). In this way, the EQF increasingly contributes to a common language for qualification frameworks globally.

The further analysis of the international dimension of the EQF showed that the EQF and its related activities **contribute to a better understanding and fairer recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications to some extent, with considerable potential in this respect**. More specifically, creating cross-links, fostering international cooperation, and conducting comparison pilots increases the broader knowledge of non-EQF frameworks, and thus trust. However, while instances show that the EQF could be used in practice in recognition procedures, this seems to be limited for the time being and this opportunity not frequently used.

More than half of the survey respondents, (42 out of 61, mainly public authorities), aware of the EQF comparison pilots<sup>59</sup> found that such comparisons increase understanding of the content and level of non-EQF qualifications. While the effects of the EQF comparison work cannot be fully assessed yet, as only one pilot had finished at the time of the evaluation and others are still on-going, EQF AG stakeholders recognise the potential of the Ukrainian comparison report from 2023 to facilitate trust and understanding of the Ukrainian qualification framework. Furthermore, they believe that on-going EQF activities continue to encourage engagement with relevant international stakeholders, as 36 of 61 of survey respondents see improved cooperation in the field of qualifications with non-EQF countries due to a more structured comparison work than in 2017.

In addition to improving ties with and knowledge about non-EQF frameworks, the EQF could play an increased role in recognition of qualifications. For example, according to ENIC-NARIC stakeholders, ENIC-NARIC centres rely to some extent on the EQF as a tool that contributes to more consistent recognition of qualifications, although most useful when non-EQF systems are similar to the EQF. As another specific example, 20 out of 32 countries with regulated assessment criteria for HE indicated already in 2016 that the level of a qualification was a criterion.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the EQF features prominently in the European recognition manual for credential evaluators and admissions officers in HE

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<sup>58</sup> The desk research indicated that the EQF is used in the development of the [African Continental Qualifications Framework](#) (ACQF)

<sup>59</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).

<sup>60</sup> The Committee of the Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (2016) [Monitoring of the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Final Report](#).

institutions.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, national stakeholders who do not work directly with recognition procedures (SE, ES, PL, RS) could not identify such impact, either because of the early stage of development of their own NQF, or because of already established recognition procedures. Thus, the practical use of the EQF and EQF comparison pilots in national recognition procedures is still to be determined, as also only 30 out of 61 survey respondents identified improvement of national procedures as a result of the comparison work.

The better understanding of non-EQF qualification frameworks and the possible application of the EQF in recognition processes could support the integration of migrants with qualifications acquired in third countries, given that many work below the level of their skills and qualifications.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, promoting the transparency of qualifications systems through the EQF is an objective of the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. It is, however, not possible to identify direct links at this stage because the recent comparison with the Ukrainian framework is the only example of a comparison with the national frameworks of a main origin country and many origin countries do not have comparable national frameworks. Moreover, labour market integration outcomes also depend on national policies and legislation, which are driven by the changing economic landscape, approaches to migration, and the labour market.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the literature shows that third-country nationals' integration in the labour market also depends on other factors, such as language barriers, legal status, access to formal and informal networks, access to information about the labour market.<sup>64</sup>

### **Effectiveness of governance structure**

The 2017 EQF Recommendation was operationalised via its governance structure (EQF AG and NCPs) and working methods (plenary meetings, project groups, PLAs). The analysis shows their clear positive contribution to the operationalisation of the EQF as they provide a platform for exchange, learning and trust building among all EQF countries. The analysis of their effectiveness is presented in the section below (*"Efficiency of working methods"*), as it allows to relate costs and benefits.

The operationalisation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation was further supported by Cedefop and ETF with their technical expertise and guidance. These are positively

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<sup>61</sup> Nuffic (2020) [The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions](#).

<sup>62</sup> In 2021, the EU over-qualification rate was 39.6 % for non-EU citizens and 32.0 % for citizens of other EU Member States. By contrast, the over-qualification rate for nationals stood at 20.8%. See [Eurostat](#)

<sup>63</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>64</sup> See for example European Migration Network (2019), Labour Market Integration of Third Country Nationals in EU Member States; Pędziwiatr, K., Brzozowski, J., & Nahorniuk, O. (2022). Refugees from Ukraine in Kraków. Centre for Advanced Studies of Population and Religion Cracow University of Economics

assessed by EQF AG stakeholders and thus, deemed to largely support the EQF. Among others:

- Cedefop supports the implementation of the EQF with extensive conceptual work, such as in relation to learning outcomes and NQF developments; provides technical expertise (e.g. in the referencing process, in preparation of EQF AG meetings and PLAs); promotes the use of the EQF by raising awareness among stakeholders; provides information and resources on how to use the EQF.
- ETF supports and provides guidance in aligning EU neighbouring countries NQFs with the EQF, promotes the transparency and comparability of qualifications in the EU and its neighbouring countries and supports neighbourhood countries that are part of the EQF in the referencing of their NQF to the EQF. In addition, it supported the comparison of the Ukrainian NQF with EQF.

Interviewed EQF AG members and NCPs highlighted that EQF AG documents to which Cedefop and ETF contributes are useful and well prepared, and events were always a forum for fruitful discussions with a lot of information provided by participating national experts. To further support this, 67 out of 70 survey respondents express this for Cedefop, and 10 out of 10 for ETF.<sup>65</sup>

## Efficiency

### Efficiency of implementation

Benefits derived by the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation cannot be expressed in financial terms. However, consulted national and EU level stakeholders see them in increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, increased trust through working together, increased cooperation in the field of qualifications. No strong conclusions on efficiency can be drawn since there is no systematically collected data on the costs and benefits allowing for direct comparison. However, the vast majority of consulted stakeholders consider that the implementation benefits outweigh the incurred costs to do so or are in balance (see Figure 3 below).

First, the extensive (re)-referencing work increases the quality of the report and contributes to the transparency of the process. Stakeholders involved in these exercises find that these benefits outweigh the costs related to this process.

Second, the set up of databases and registers increase the accessibility and availability of information on qualifications with an EQF level, benefitting a wide range of users: education stakeholders, employees, employers, expert panels, guidance counsellors and others. This offers sufficient justification for the evaluation to find that these substantial benefits outweigh their costs.

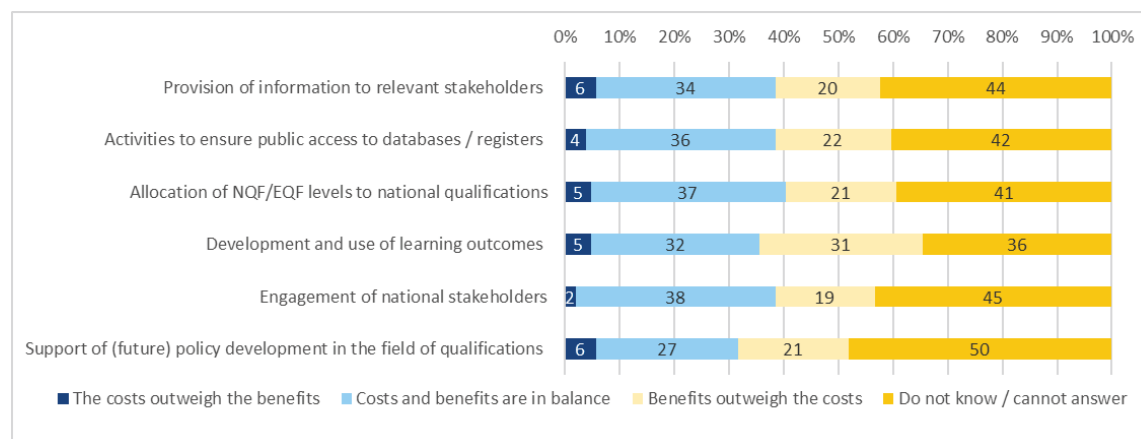
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<sup>65</sup> Only respondents who have worked with CEDEFOP and ETF were asked to answer this question, leading to a difference in the number of total responses.

Third, the overall costs related to grants for EQF NCPs are limited, particularly when compared against the benefit of having a network of EQF NCPs.

Fourth, including qualifications outside the formal domain in NQFs gives their providers additional visibility and is considered by labour market stakeholders and EQF end users as an unofficial quality sign of the qualification<sup>66</sup>.

Figure 3 – Assessment of rate between costs and benefits for key EQF activities



The costs incurred by **EQF countries** against which these benefits are assessed can relate to activities at national level (implementation) and EU level (participation at exchanges). National implementation costs are:

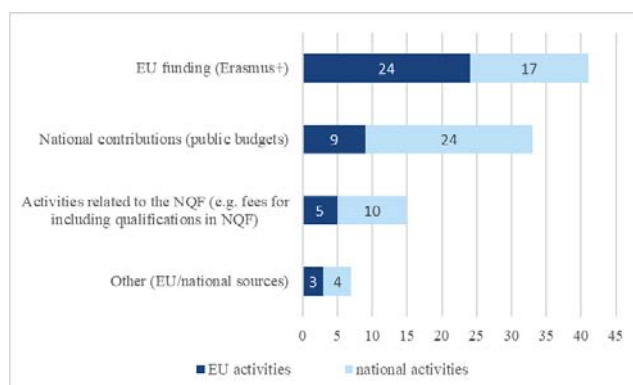
- One-off: (re)-referencing or the set up and connection of a qualifications register. While an exact price estimate cannot be given, interviews with NCPs underline that the costs for referencing and updating the referencing are substantial because of extensive involvement of national qualification authorities, broader stakeholders, and (international) experts. However, as outlined in section 3, the (re)-referencing was applicable only to 8 countries in the evaluation period, thus leading to limited overall costs. With regard to the set up of databases and registers, national approaches differ, leading to varying costs, depending on the stage of implementation, qualification contexts.
- Recurring: indication of EQF levels on qualifications, maintenance of databases/registers and their linking to the Europass platform, provision of information and communication efforts. These recurring costs are reflected in the costs to maintain an EQF National Coordination Point (NCP) since they are NCPs' tasks.

The costs incurred by countries for EQF implementation are eligible under an EU grant for EQF NCPs, co-financed through the Erasmus+ programme. There is a large range of activities eligible for co-funding, as long as they relate to the implementation of the EQF at the national level, such as indicating EQF levels on qualification documents, activities

<sup>66</sup> See for instance for the Netherlands NIDAP Research (2019), B2B NLQF Overzicht Leven Lang Leren markt Nederland Gebruik NLQF/EQF bij bedrijven en instellingen, p. 11.

related to EQF referencing, and communication. The grants are in a range of EUR 20k-60k per year per country<sup>67</sup>, and represent a maximum EU co-financing of 75 % (requiring a national contribution of at least 25%). The grants are deemed as adequate by 36 out of 42 NCPs and EQF AG survey respondents, with only 3 out of 42 NCPs and EQF AG survey respondents assessing EU funding for EQF implementation as insufficient. Figure 2 shows that EU funding via Erasmus+ is mentioned most often as a main source for activities for EQF implementation. Activities, related to the day-to-day operations of the NQF at national level are usually funded by national budgets and not covered by the Erasmus+ grant.

Figure 2 – Main funding source for EU and national level actions



Some of the countries open to qualifications outside formal education have introduced procedures to include such qualifications in their NQFs, which tend to include fees **for providers of qualifications**. The case study mapping showed that qualification authorities charge (private) providers to cover the administrative costs of applying for the inclusion of individual qualifications in their NQF. The costs identified were overall limited (between EUR 1 000 – EUR 4 000) and not found to deter applications for inclusion in the NQF.

The incurred costs at **EU level** include provision of expertise by the EC, Cedefop and ETF, coordinating and participating in the work of the EQF AG. On average, the Commission has EUR 2 million via Erasmus+ available annually to support the implementation of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, further supported by an estimated 1 FTE staff. The distribution of these resources is summarised in Table 2, showing that the largest share (ca. 1.5 million annually) is distributed to the national level via grants to the NCPs. Estimated yearly costs incurred by Cedefop are summarised in Table 3 below, while ETF's costs can be assessed as five staff members (no FTE available). This estimate does not distinguish between support for the AG and direct support to partner countries, with the latter estimated as the larger share<sup>68</sup>. Overall, the total EU level costs appear limited, compared to costs of other spending programmes and in absolute terms.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission (2018), Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, title 3.40.

<sup>68</sup> 3s / Ockham IPS (2020), [Evaluation of the ETF actions on the reform of qualifications systems in partner countries 2014-2019](#).



Table 2 - Allocated investments in Erasmus+ (2014-2020)/(2021-2027) to implementation of the EQF, million EUR

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
<b>Key Action 2: Online tools and services for skills and qualifications – focused on EQF</b>	0.04	0.07	0.1			0.21
<b>Key Action 2: Europass platform and related tools – EQF related</b>				0.34	0.1	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>69</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
<b>Staff</b>	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE

*Key Action 2: Interconnection of national databases for qualifications with European. Key Action 3: Support of EQF AG, organisation of PLA, Conferences, EU communication activities. Source: study based on Erasmus+ Annual Work Programme 2018-2022 and more specific estimates provided by the EC.*

Table 3 - Costs incurred by Cedefop on EQF – related work, in FTE or million EUR

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

*Increased in 2021 and 2022 linked to additional studies (e.g. NQF Inventory update). Source: Cedefop, Programming document 2019-2021, 2020-2022, 2021-2023, 2022-2024.*

### Efficiency of working methods

The collected evidence shows that the governance structure of the EQF functions well, with the work of the EQF AG found as efficient to a very large extent. This is based on the positive assessment of involved stakeholders of the effective working methods and balanced composition. More specifically, the combination of working methods is judged as efficient since EQF AG members consulted find added value and effectiveness of each method: EQF AG meetings allow for overall discussion and networking, whilst PLAs and project groups allow for more in-depth discussion and learning from each other. To further corroborate this, a satisfaction survey among 30 EQF AG members included only one to two respondents not satisfied with the AG plenary meetings, PLAs, project groups or studies. At the same time, the costs for organising AG meetings are limited, including mainly labour costs of EC, Cedefop and ETF staff, and travel costs. Travel costs were reduced even further as a result of COVID-19.

Indeed, the efficiency of the EQF AG is further confirmed by its ability to adapt to the impact of COVID-19, when meetings were moved online, which allowed to save time, money, reduce environmental impact and increase accessibility, even if meeting dynamics were shifted. Recognising the added value of online meetings and importance of face-to-face interaction, the EQF AG decided to keep two out of its three annual meetings online, confirming its continuous development.

<sup>69</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 this report has distributed these values proportionately to all the years.

Factors that influence the satisfactory work of the EQF AG mentioned by EQF AG stakeholders include level of interactivity, time to prepare, consistency of members, follow-up and information flow between working methods.

There is limited evidence to assess the efficiency of NCPs. Due to different arrangements, NCPs perform a variety of functions in different Member States. Hence, no clear overview of the NCP tasks and how they are implemented in each country can be provided, as this would require an extensive analysis of institutional arrangements in each country. None of the stakeholders consulted expressed concerns with the functioning of the NCPs, but NCPs consulted highlighted the importance of networking and information flows within the NCP and other national institutions and between NCPs for their efficiency.

## Coherence

### Internal coherence

The analysis found the 2017 EQF Recommendation to be internally coherent, with consistent objectives and recommendations to achieve them.<sup>70</sup> It provides a broad policy framework with multiple pathways for countries to achieve the set objectives, supported and further detailed in operational guidance provided in the EQF AG. At the level of implementation, some EQF AG and NCPs stakeholders pointed out the need to target more closely EQF end users with communication and outreach efforts. While end users are not explicitly defined as a target group in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, this does not represent a contradiction in practical terms and is reflected in recent developments of online comparison tools for EQF end users.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, as the EQF carries implications for NQFs, and not directly for individual qualifications, it is consistent to target primarily stakeholders that work with the overall qualification system or framework, not those whose involvement is limited to individual qualifications.

### External coherence

Stakeholders assess **the EQF as coherent with policy initiatives and instruments at the national level**, as only 9 out of 102 survey and 6 out of 229 PC respondents expressed doubts in this regard. This is also in line with the findings under “effectiveness”, which showed that the provisions of the EQF are aligned with national practices and showed the role the EQF can play in stimulating or complementing national education policy reforms (see “effectiveness”).

The 2017 EQF Recommendation is also perceived as coherent with other relevant EU policies to a very large extent, as only 6 out of 102 survey respondents and 13 out of 229 PC respondents reported some doubts in this regard, with no differences across stakeholder type. More specifically, **the EQF 8-level reference framework functions as a backbone**

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<sup>70</sup> Section 4.1.3.1

<sup>71</sup> See for example: [Compare Qualifications | Europass](#)



of EU initiatives as it supports their implementation, shown in the following set of examples.

- The EQF has a strong link with EU instruments supporting links between formal, non-formal and informal learning, such as the 2012 **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning**<sup>72</sup>. Validation allows for more transparency of skills available in the workforce and facilitates a better match between skills supply and labour demand. The EQF is integral to validation in many ways. It promotes validation structures at national level with its referencing criteria 3, which calls for NQFs to relate to validation arrangements. It promotes the learning outcomes approach, which eases validation as it supports comparability. It makes the outcomes of validation more visible by promoting the inclusion of any type of qualification within NQFs. Building on the latter point, the EQF also constitutes an important element of the **Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials**<sup>73</sup>, which calls for micro-credentials to be included in NQFs, and to consider EQF principles, such as on learning outcomes and quality assurance. An EQF level is also one of the common European standard elements to describe micro-credentials. Another example is the 2008 **Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies**<sup>74</sup> which specifies that the EQF as a common reference framework should facilitate workers mobility and help make guidance a part of Member States education and employment policies. The 2020 **Council Recommendation on VET**<sup>75</sup> also calls for the use of the EQF, such as development of higher VET programmes at EQF levels 5 to 8. The nature of the EQF as a comprehensive framework, relating formal, non-formal and informal qualifications and facilitating learning progression between them, can serve as a compass in lifelong guidance.
- The Europass Platform is the official platform for information on the EQF. The **2018 Europass Decision**<sup>76</sup>, states that the platform shall contain information on qualifications and qualifications frameworks. The platform contains the EQF referencing reports, links to NQF websites, links NQF registers/databases and the NQF

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<sup>72</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>73</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>74</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, p. 4–7.

<sup>75</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01, [OJ C 417](#), 2.12.2020, p. 1–16.

<sup>76</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](#)[OJ L 112](#)[OJ L 112](#), 2.5.2018, p. 42–50.

comparison tool. National qualifications databases and registers are mapped to the Qualification Dataset Register (QDR) which is a component of the Europass platform. The Europass Decision further calls for Europass-web based tools to refer to the EQF when providing information on qualifications, national education and training systems and other relevant topics.

- The EQF also enables the practical implementation of EU instruments supporting adult learning. By fostering a link between formal, non-formal and informal learning, the EQF supports the implementation of the **2016 Upskilling Pathways Recommendation**, which aims to close gaps in basic skills via increasing provision of formal adult education, expanding the availability of routes of progression based on non-formal adult learning, or supporting work-based routes of progression towards qualifications at EQF level 3 or 4. **The Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts**<sup>77</sup> calls for the use of national public registries for training, career guidance and validation opportunities which contain information structured in line with the European Learning Model which builds on the data fields for electronic publication of information on qualifications described in Annex VI to the 2017 EQF Recommendation.
- The EQF and its principles also create synergies with EU instruments on common competence frameworks and taxonomies, with scope to align further. For instance, cooperation in the framework of the **European classification on Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications** (ESCO) is coherently linked to the EQF. ESCO provides a common language on occupations and skills on the labour market. The link of learning outcomes to ESCO (see pilot<sup>78</sup>) has the potential to further improve the transparency of qualifications and to enable an automated matching (or recommender systems) between the skills of qualification holders and learning or job opportunities. The 2018 **Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning** follows a similar logic to the 2017 EQF Recommendation by structuring competences into sub-areas and is broadly coherent with the EQF.
- By fostering transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications, the EQF also supports EU initiatives aiming to improve the mobility of workers and learners. This includes the 2018 **Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education** and training qualifications and the

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<sup>77</sup> Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts, [OJ C 243](#), 27.6.2022, p. 26–34.

<sup>78</sup> See for instance European Commission (2022) [Results of the third phase of the pilot project for linking learning outcomes of qualifications with ESCO skills](#) and European Commission, (2022), [ESCO Annual report 2021](#).

outcomes of learning periods<sup>79</sup> which invites Member States to reference to the EQF as an important basis for automatic recognition, and the **2020 Council Recommendation on VET** for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience in which EQF levels and learning outcomes principles are referred to.

- As a last point, the EQF serves as a reference point for any common training endeavours as it provides a broader framework and a possibility to position such content within qualification frameworks. For example, the **Directive on recognition of professional qualifications EC/2005/36 as amended by Directive 2013/55/EU** introduces the concept of common training frameworks, which should be based on EQF levels<sup>80</sup>. The **Council Recommendation of VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience** explores the idea of European Core Vocational Profiles, among others, developed in the framework of European transparency tools. More recently, work towards **Skills Academies** at EU level, such as Net-Zero Industry Academies<sup>81</sup> or Cybersecurity Skills Academies<sup>82</sup>, refer to including issued credentials in NQFs, which will relate them to the EQF.

The extensive set of examples shows the role of the EQF as an enabler of EU policies and initiatives, aiming to improve learning, mobility, employability. Thus, the EQF is fully coherent with the **broader EU policy objectives and targets**, such as the 2030 European target of 60% of adults to participate annually in training and 78% employment rate, as defined in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan<sup>83</sup>. Furthermore, the nature and position of the EQF in the broader policy framework aligns it very well with a more recent policy focus on skills-first and attracting talent from abroad, also deemed relevant to achieve these targets.

The EQF is also aligned with the **Bologna process, establishing the European Higher Education Area (“EHEA”)**, with no overlap between the two due to their different purpose: While the EHEA qualifications framework intends to harmonise systems<sup>84</sup>, the

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<sup>79</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>80</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, p. 132–170.

<sup>81</sup> COM(2023) 62 final, Communication on [A Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age](#), See Recital 66.

<sup>82</sup> European Commission, [Closing the cybersecurity talent gap to boost the EU’s competitiveness, growth and resilience](#), COM(2023) 207 final, See “4.3. Creating synergies and providing visibility to cybersecurity trainings and certification across Member States”

<sup>83</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, [COM\(2021\), 102 final](#).

<sup>84</sup> The recent [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#) (2020) for instance 'recognizes that accomplishing [the vision of the EHEA] will require enacting policies and implementing measures in our national frameworks, some

EQF intends to relate systems to each other. This also means that the EQF levels 5-8 are fully compatible to 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. Furthermore, reference criterion 8 refers to single reports that include both the EQF referencing (or their updates) and self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, reflecting the criteria of both frameworks.

Finally, at the **international level**, the EQF fits coherently in the larger framework of major policy developments on qualifications and lifelong learning. For example, the EQF is a central point of comparison and inspiration for the Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks.<sup>85</sup> It is furthermore contributing to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and on promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

#### **4.2. How did the EU intervention make a difference and to whom?**

The 2017 EQF Recommendation does not spell out a specific target group of the EU intervention, but addresses Member States and identifies the users of the EQF in recommendation 7, consisting of “social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities”. Given the conclusion of section 4.1 on the overall effectiveness of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the EQF is expected to have made a difference to its target group.

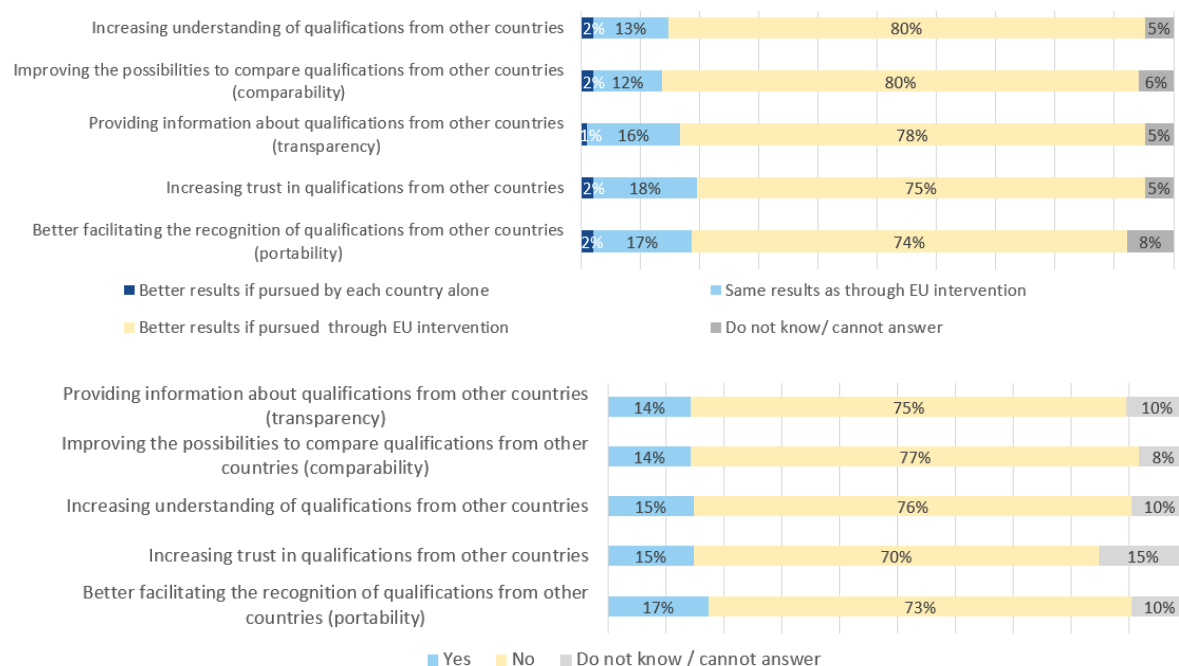
More specifically, the 2017 EQF Recommendation increased the transparency of qualifications (see section “effectiveness”), which would not have been possible to the same extent and with the same efficiency without European-level action, also supported by the majority of survey respondents, including public authorities, EQF end users and education and training providers, and with no differences in their assessment (see Figure 4 below). Given the diversity of national qualifications and education and training systems, the EQF enabled their comparability by fostering an EU-wide exchange and cooperation and by offering an EU-wide reference point to relate to.

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of which will go beyond our higher education systems and will entail alignment of wider national economic, financial and social strategies’.

<sup>85</sup> See for instance [General Report](#) to the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education - Bergen 19/20 May 2005.

Figure 4 - Do you think better results could have been achieved by Member States alone – survey and PC



The analysis also shows that the EQF has contributed significantly to the development of a common European approach to qualifications.<sup>86</sup> by establishing a common language and structure for describing and comparing qualifications and by encouraging countries to develop their own national qualifications framework, supported by all stakeholder groups - 95% (97 out of 102) of survey and 94% (216 out of 229) of PC respondents.

A smaller, but still high share of respondents also agree that the EQF increased policy cooperation in other areas (61%, 63 out of 102 survey; 66%, 151 out of 229 PC), mentioning primarily work on validation and recognition. This is in line with the analysis of “external coherence”, which showed links between the EQF and other policy instruments.

While recognising the limitations of the EQF to reach its objectives in certain areas due to national competences (e.g. recognition), increasing understanding and comparability of qualifications with a bilateral approach would be limited and less scalable, justifying an action at EU level. Furthermore, the 1 – 2% of survey respondents who indicated that the same objectives could be achieved without the 2017 EQF Recommendation (Figure 4) justified their assessment with the fact that work was initiated before 2017, referring to the Recommendation and not the EQF tool in their answer. They also focused on existing national priorities that already reflect the EQF approach (e.g. learning outcomes), but not on the aspect of transparency, which is central to the EQF. This is in line with the findings

<sup>86</sup> Visionary Analytics & Ockham IPS (2024), Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, section 4.2.

in section “effectiveness” that the EQF has limited capacity to spark reforms national education and training systems with mature NQFs.

### 4.3. Is the intervention still relevant?

#### Relevance of the EQF objectives

A workforce with the right skills is fundamental to a competitive green and digital economy, and a cornerstone of a socially fair and just society. Still, the potential of upskilling and reskilling, and student and workers’ mobility is not fully realised, as shown in the small improvement of indicators in section 2.2. **The transparency of qualifications across and within borders continues to be fundamental** in this regard and its relevance **increases in the current context and in view of future developments**.

More specifically, demographic changes shrink the available workforce<sup>87</sup> and the shift to a green and digital economy increases the need for multiple labour market transitions and changes skills demands.<sup>88</sup> Labour shortages have become a serious problem in the EU, limiting the capacity of many companies to invest. Responses to recruitment challenges include an increasing attention given by employers to elements of the talent pool other than formal qualifications. On the one hand, employers can take decisions based on the skills of applicants, independently from their formal qualifications – what is often called the skills-first approach. On the other hand, labour market actors increasingly appreciate smaller credentials, or micro-credentials (cf. 4.1. above), which can be either formal or non-formal, self-standing or a component of a wider qualification. Neither approach is fully new, but both are gaining growing relevance in the labour market. Such developments do not reduce the relevance of the objectives of the EQF, but slightly modify their meaning in the changing landscape of skills and qualifications. The focus on skills and the value of non-formal credentials are long-standing features of EU policy developments, well reflected in the fundamental principles of the EQF: in particular, that each qualification should be described in terms of learning outcomes (skills and knowledge), that qualification levels are defined through the complexity of the corresponding skills and knowledge, and that national qualifications frameworks should also include qualifications outside the formal domain. However, the fact that currently, as seen in 4.1 above, only a third of NQFs in the EU includes qualifications outside the formal domain points to the need for further guidance on how to implement the EQF principles at national level – a discussion that the EQF Advisory Group has already started. In the light of these trends, the development of European Digital Credentials is particularly promising, as the digitalisation of qualifications, either formal or non-formal, described in terms of learning

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<sup>87</sup> Average share of people aged 60 and more across EQF countries has increased from 23,7% in 2017 to 26,2 % in 2022

<sup>88</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”



outcomes (skills and knowledge) helps employers better compare applications using skills as their main reference.

Migration and integration policies become more important in addressing labour shortages, including through legal migration initiatives to attract talent from third countries and efforts to integrate beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market (including an unprecedented number of displaced people from Ukraine). At the same time, the share of adults participating in upskilling and reskilling remains low.<sup>89</sup> The Decision to implement a European Year of Skills in 2023 and 2024<sup>90</sup> highlights the urgent need to further promote skills in Europe and to attract third country talent, which also includes the European Qualifications Framework.

The urgency of ensuring a smoothly functioning labour market via transparency and transferability of skills and qualifications has only increased since 2017, given the described mega-trends. Indeed, survey and PC respondents see digitalisation as a key trend impacting qualifications, followed by migration and demographic aging.<sup>91</sup> The high importance of migration is further exemplified in four case study countries (LT, RO, SE, PT), which stress for example the need to facilitate the recognition of third country qualifications, with the qualifications of displaced people from Ukraine as an urgent issue.

In addition to the listed mega-trends, developments impact more specifically education and training systems, and qualifications. This includes the increasing importance of remote education, but also the emergence of new credential types and assessment forms. For example, 70% (71 out of 102) of survey respondents indicate that the use of micro-credentials impacts the EQF, including responses from 11 out of 11 education and training providers. This is corroborated by the views of national stakeholders consulted in four out of five case study countries (FI, LT, RO, SE).

These changes shift the needs of relevant stakeholders, such as national authorities, education and training providers, students, workers, and employers, in a way that increases the importance of the EQF objectives. This calls for continued efforts to improve transparency in skills and qualifications and to better link different forms of learning that allow a quicker and more efficient match between skills supply and skill demand, also stressed in the Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age.<sup>92</sup> A very high share of

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<sup>89</sup> Cedefop underlines that approximately 46% of the adult population, aged 25-64, are in need of up- and reskilling due to a low level of education and low cognitive and digital skills. 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>

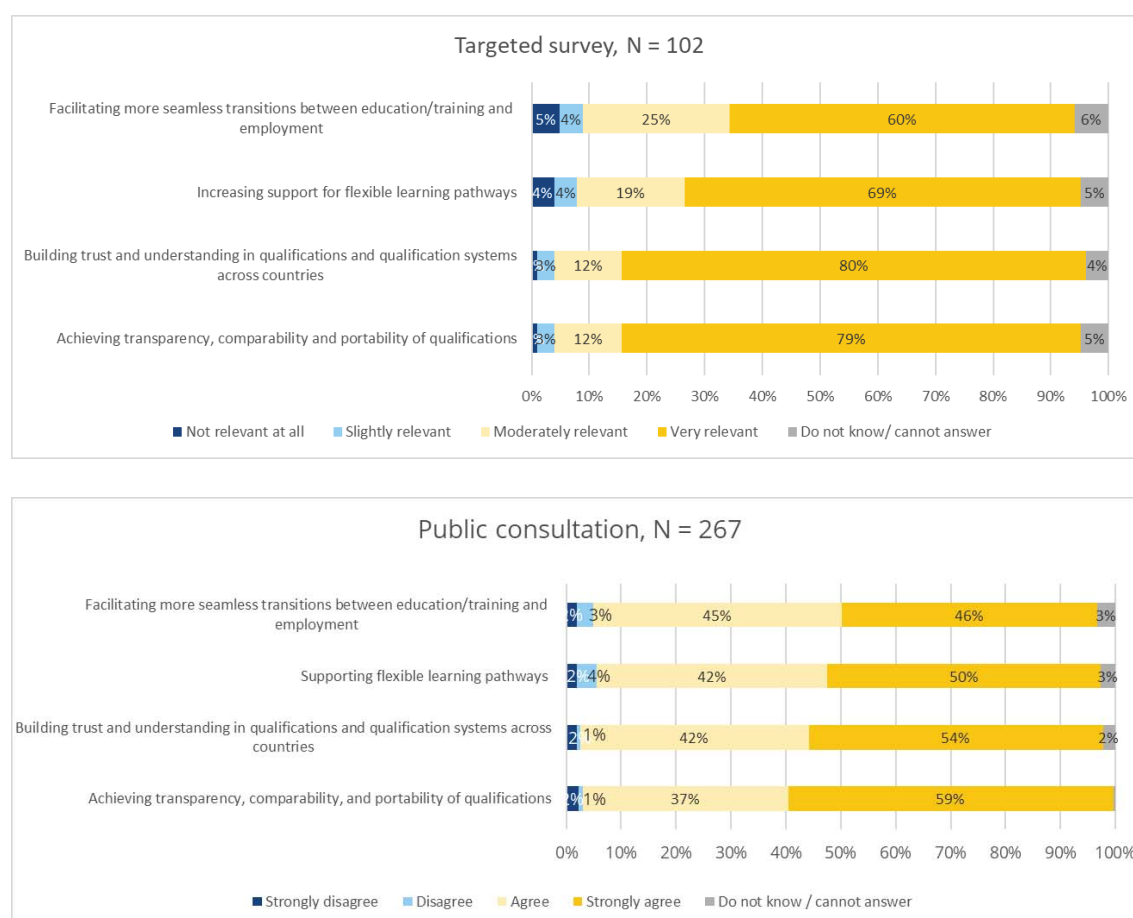
<sup>90</sup> OJ L 125, 11.5.2023, [Decision \(EU\) 2023/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on a European Year of Skills](#)

<sup>91</sup> Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, section 4.3.1.

<sup>92</sup> COM(2023) 62 final, Communication on [A Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age](#), See 2.3 “Enhancing Skills”, p. 14.

survey respondents also agree that the EQF objectives are and will remain relevant, with no differences across stakeholder types:

Figure 5 – Assessment of current and future relevance of EQF objectives



## Relevance of the EQF recommendations

The analysis showed that the elements of the 2017 EQF Recommendation **remain relevant in view of shifts in stakeholder needs and broader context developments**, described above.<sup>93</sup> The 2017 EQF Recommendation is formulated in a broad manner, allowing enough scope to adjust the operationalisation of its elements in a changing context. For example, the implementation approach to **communication and outreach efforts to the wider public** does not meet fully the needs of 42% (43 out of 102) of survey respondents, including both public authorities and EQF end users. Case study stakeholders in RO and FI also stress that the current communication approach is not systematic and structured enough, and lacks regular monitoring and evaluation (LT). This is in line with the findings of “effectiveness”. These observations indicate the need to adjust communication activities in practice. However, this does not call for a change in the 2017 EQF Recommendation

<sup>93</sup> Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, section 4.3.2.



itself, which defines the need for communication efforts, but does not prescribe the manner in which these should be implemented.

Other elements that require practical guidance to better align their implementation with a changing context include:<sup>94</sup>

- The **current approach to the provision of information on databases/registers** does not fully correspond to the needs of 20% (20 out of 102) of survey respondents (53 out of 102). Stakeholder views from the case studies in RO, SE and LT provide possible reasons for this, mainly linked to different quality of national databases and registers, which still do not make sufficient use of digital tools (e.g. artificial intelligence) and are not well linked with other existing data sources (e.g. ESCO) which would allow for big data analysis and easier search for relevant information. This should be understood in the context of current development, where many countries are still developing their national databases and registers, and others are redesigning theirs. Interoperability and integration are expected to increase with an increase in the number and improved quality of databases connected at the European level.
- With regard to the possible procedure for **levelling of international qualifications**, deemed as not meeting the needs of 26% (26 out of 102) of survey respondents, stakeholders in RO and PT stress the missing structured guidance. Work on such guidance has been going on in 2023 in the context of the EQF AG.
- The current approach to **comparison with non-EQF third country qualifications** does not meet fully the needs of 27% (27 out of 102) of survey respondents. This could be explained with the importance of migration trends, influencing the need for recognition of third country qualifications, including from Ukraine.
- While no need for changes to the number of levels or content of the level descriptors is identified, case study stakeholders indicate missing guidance<sup>95</sup> on the inclusion of **micro-credentials** into qualifications frameworks (in LT, FI, RO, SE) and on **opening up of NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal education** (LT, FI). These views are in line with the identified need to better link different forms of learning. The emergence of new forms of learning, such as online courses, leading to a bigger diversity of qualifications also raises new questions of quality assurance principles, with a common European approach missing.

Given the increased relevance of the objectives of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, the need to keep the referencing up-to-date for its functioning, and the number of areas with potential for strengthened implementation, it is judged that an EU level action is still required.

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<sup>94</sup> Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, see Figure 14, page 130.

<sup>95</sup> Work on such guidance is on-going, for example ETF (2022) [Guide to design, issue and recognise micro-credentials](#).

## 5. WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED?

### 5.1. Conclusions

The EQF is a well-established reference point that is widely accepted among institutions working with qualifications, with NQFs referenced to it in 26 Member States and ten associated countries. The 2017 EQF Recommendation has given a new boost to and strengthened the EQF initiative, with the referencing process almost fully completed, learning outcomes approach used throughout, provision of information continuously improving, and comparison work with third country frameworks following a structured procedure. Provisions linked to the availability of information on the content of qualifications, presentation of learning outcomes, set-up of national databases and registers and opening up of national frameworks to qualifications outside the formal domain have not been fully implemented, but these developments follow the stages of development of NQFs. Thus, different progress among countries was to be expected.

As a result of this implementation progress, **the EQF contributed substantially to increased transparency of qualifications, especially from the formal domain.** Progress, albeit more limited, is observed in relation to qualifications outside the formal domain. The EQF also **sparked discussions on lifelong learning policies at national level, especially in countries with less mature NQFs.** While the EQF contributed to national debates on modernising education and training systems with a focus on NQFs, its effects on employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners are less tangible. This is to be expected, given the number of external factors that play a role in this regard, and the observation that the EQF is not well known among EQF end users.

**The EQF is also perceived as an international benchmark, and source of inspiration for the development of regional and national qualifications frameworks in third countries,** which is a positive impact beyond its defined objectives. The comparison between the Ukrainian national qualifications framework and the EQF carries a particular meaning in the current geopolitical context. At a more operational level, the comparison work with third country qualifications frameworks has improved the mutual understanding of third country qualifications in the EU and of European qualifications in third countries. At the same time, the number of countries involved in comparison work remained limited for resource reasons. In addition, the possible effect of this work on easier recognition of qualifications depends on national recognition procedures.

**The implementation of the EQF is efficient to a large extent, as the benefits outweigh its limited costs and the governance structure contributed substantially to the implementation progress achieved.** Implementation costs at national level (such as one-off referencing or continuous work of NCPs) and at EU level (such as expertise by ETF, Cedefop, the Commission and coordination of the EQF AG) are outweighed by the increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, increased trust through working together, and increased cooperation in the field of qualifications. Implementation does not add any cost or burden to companies, which can benefit from clearer

understanding of the level of qualifications from other countries and, thanks to the learning outcomes approach, of the content of all qualifications, including from their country. However, awareness of the EQF among companies and the broader public appeared limited when compared to its use by public authorities, potentially hindering the full realisation of its benefits to all groups. This could also be linked to the still partial connection of national qualifications databases to the European level. The EQF governance structure and working methods provide a platform for exchange, learning and trust building among all EQF countries, effectively contributing to the realisation of the benefits identified and appreciated by EQF AG members and NCPs.

The positive effects of the EQF are largely due to the EU intervention. **The EQF has a clear added value**, as it enabled the development of a common approach to qualifications in Europe and supported cooperation at a scale and manner that would not have been possible without an EU intervention, given the diversity of national qualifications and education and training systems. More specifically, 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 EQF countries. It also has the potential to facilitate talent mobility by helping compare qualification systems with third countries.

And **the relevance of EU intervention in this domain has not only persisted, but increased** as a result of recent socio-economic developments. In addition to transparency of qualifications, transparency of skills has become key for the smooth functioning of the European labour market, able to respond to the skills demands of the green and digital transitions and of a competitive economy. Through the shift to learning outcomes, concurring with databases that represent qualifications and their learning outcomes, the EQF also contributes to transparency of skills contained in qualifications. Furthermore, responding to these new skills demands in the context of an aging workforce and labour shortages means that Europe has to become an attractive choice for third country nationals. Better understanding and valuing qualifications, either from Member States or third countries, and the skills they contain is key to this purpose.

The persistent relevance of the **EQF is also visible in its role as a backbone of national and EU policies and instruments for transparency of skills and qualifications, being not only fully coherent, but also supporting their implementation**. More specifically, the EQF is well positioned and supports EU initiatives working towards better links between formal, non-formal and informal learning, adult learning, workers and learners mobility, and common competence frameworks and taxonomies.

## **5.2. Lessons learned**

**The EQF approach is well equipped to support transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications within and between countries.** To ensure continued trust in and understanding of qualifications, it would be necessary to maintain the existing

structures and processes, without the need for reduction or change, as the current approach fulfils its goals in an effective and efficient manner (*“Effectiveness of governance structure”*). Given current developments, particular focus would be needed by Member States to ensure referenced reports are up-to-date and databases and registers of qualifications and learning opportunities are connected to the Europass platform and by the Commission to ensure guidance exists on how to address changes in the qualifications landscape, such as the emergence of micro-credentials. Continued focus is also needed by all on the use of learning outcomes, being a cornerstone of the EQF process. (*“Relevance of the EQF recommendations”*).

**The EQF is comprehensive in its structure, but in practice still remains mainly a transparency tool for qualifications from the formal domain.** Further support is therefore needed for the integration in NQFs of qualifications other than full formal education and training qualifications, including international qualifications, micro-credentials, qualifications outside the formal domain. The EQF governance structures could serve as a platform for exchange on national approaches and experiences, including for the provision of guidance on how to address these and could contribute to more flexible learning pathways (*“Effectiveness of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation”*).

**The EQF has clear and well-established links with other transparency tools, such as ESCO, and has become an integral part of other EU policies and tools, such as the Europass framework and platform.** Maintaining and further strengthening these existing synergies could contribute to an even more comprehensive approach to skills and qualifications in Europe. Such an approach is needed to ensure better transparency of skills and qualifications – an objective that has increased in relevance in the current context of labour shortages and shifting skills demands, as highlighted in the European Year of Skills (*“Relevance of the EQF objectives”*). Indeed, given current policy developments and shifts in the labour market, the EQF has the potential to support a skills-first approach, for example, by further strengthening links to different validation phases, and to bridge the formal and non-formal learning domains such as in the context of Individual Learning Accounts and Net-Zero Industry Academies or Cybersecurity Skills Academies (*“External coherence”*). It could also support a more attractive Europe for third country talent, by further enhancing international cooperation and establishing the EQF as a de facto global benchmark – the comparison between the EQF and the Ukrainian national qualifications framework has a special significance in this context<sup>96</sup> (*“International dimension of the EQF and links to third countries”*).

**The EQF has clear practical value for stakeholders working with qualifications, but its practical purpose is still not sufficiently clear to the broader public.** There is a need to further strengthen communication efforts, in a more structured and targeted manner, bringing the EQF closer to end users such as workers, employers, students (*“Effectiveness of implementing the 2017 EQF Recommendation”*). To further support the transparency

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<sup>96</sup> Ukraine has become a candidate country to the EU in June 2022 and as a consequence is now entitled to reference its NQF to the EQF in line with the EQF referencing criteria.

and understanding of the content of qualifications, it could be explored how accessibility of information on the EQF, the NQFs and the qualifications therein, can be improved, especially with the help of digitalisation, making use of connected qualifications databases and registers, possible links with ESCO and digital credentials, including between the EU and the third countries (*“External coherence”*). The use of the EQF and national frameworks supporting the recognition of qualifications, both within the EU and in international contexts, could be further promoted, particularly in relation to third countries that are priorities in terms of talent attraction and main origin countries of legally residing third-country nationals (*“International dimension of the EQF and links to third countries”*).

### *Lead DG, Decide Planning/CWP references*

The evaluation of the Recommendation was led by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, with a Decide planning reference PLAN/2021/11164.

### *Organisation and timing*

An **Inter-service Steering Group (ISG)** was set up, coordinated by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (represented by staff from the lead policy unit, other relevant policy units and the Better Regulation unit) and including members from the Secretariat-General, and the Directorate-Generals for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship a SMEs (GROW); Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (EAC); Migration and Home Affairs (HOME); Research and Innovation (RTD), Structural Reforms Support (REFORM) and the Joint Research Centre (JRC). The ISG could take advantage of the technical assistance of experts from Cedefop and ETF.

The ISG also acted as steering group for the **external study** supporting the evaluation, which was carried out by Visionary Analytics. Contract VC/2022/0096 was awarded after reopening of competition (tender VT/2021/045) within the multiple framework contract EMPL/2020/OP/0016). The contract VC/2022/009 started on 5.5.2022. The draft final report of the external study was received on 24.4.2023, the inter-service steering group provided comments by 28.4.2024 and the contractor delivered the accepted revised final report on 2.8.2023, along with the agreed annexes.

All Better Regulation requirements were fulfilled. The evaluation was not selected for the scrutiny of the RSB.

### *Evidence used*

The main sources of information used in this evaluation are:

- Annex III of the **Commission Staff Working Document supporting the Commission proposal**<sup>97</sup> underpinning the 2017 EQF Recommendation and the **explanatory memorandum** of the Commission proposal.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> [SWD\(2016\) 195 final](#), Annex III: Enhancing the transparency of qualifications – the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Commission Staff Working Document Analytical underpinning for a New Skills Agenda for Europe

<sup>98</sup> [COM\(2016\) 383 final](#) Proposal for a Council Recommendation 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



- **Evaluations** of the 2008 EQF Recommendation, conducted by the European Parliament<sup>99</sup> and the European Commission.<sup>100</sup>
- Results of the **2022 NQF Inventory**.<sup>101</sup>
- **Study supporting the evaluation** of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.<sup>102</sup>
- **Public consultation-** with 267 responses, cf. Annex V
- **Targeted consultations-** in the framework of the external independent study, including interviews or focus groups with 131 stakeholders, cf. Annex V

See Annex II for additional information on the methodological approach taken. To ensure quality, the ISG provided feedback throughout all steps of the evaluation process and findings were presented twice in the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, on 28.2.2023 and on 19.6.2023.

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<sup>99</sup> European Parliament, [State of play of the European Qualifications Framework implementation](#), March 2012

<sup>100</sup> ICF GHK (2013), External study “[Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation](#)”

<sup>101</sup> Cedefop and ETF (2023), [European inventory of NQFs](#), Country Specific reports 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Visionary Analytics & Ockham IPS (2024), Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

### *Overall approach to the evaluation*

The evaluation follows the requirements set out in the **Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox**.<sup>103</sup> This includes looking into how EU Member States have responded to the Recommendation and assessing its implementation against the **five key evaluation criteria** of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU added value presented in the below Table.

*Table 4 – Overview of evaluation criteria*

Criteria	Overview of key aspects
Effectiveness	The examination of effectiveness focused on assessing EQF contribution to achieving its (wider) objectives, implementation of key provision of the Recommendation addressed to Member States, implementation of key provisions of the Recommendation addressed to by European Commission and EQF 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 Advisory Group and National Coordination Points (NCPs) has been efficient, how effective have the working methods of the EQF governance structure 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 foreseen 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.

The evaluation work relied **on an external study**. To **ensure a robust analytical approach**, the research of the external study was based on Intervention Logic and Evaluation Matrix with judgment criteria and indicators.

More specifically, this study looked not only at the mere impact of a measure but it also addressed the mechanisms and circumstances leading to the observed effects (effectiveness). To that purpose, the study design was based on an intervention logic that sets out a high-level understanding of the needs, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, results, and impacts of the 2017 EQF Recommendation (**Error! Reference source not found.** below). The intervention logic was combined with the evaluation questions

<sup>103</sup> [Better regulation: guidelines and toolbox.](#)

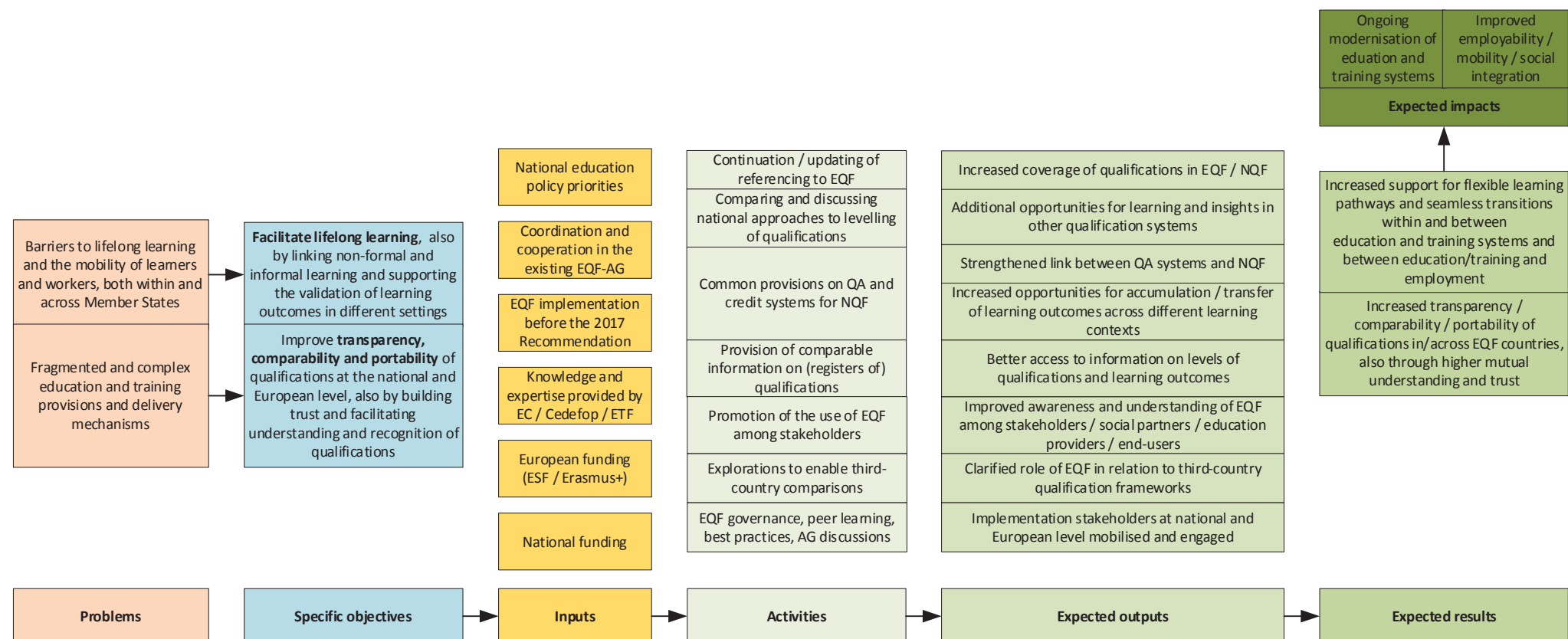
specified in the tender specifications for the external study to develop the evaluation matrix (Annex III). The evaluation matrix operationalised evaluation questions providing concrete indicators to be assessed and linked them to data collection methods to gather the evidence needed for the assessment.

As far as possible, this analytical approach was complemented by an assessment of causality – i.e., the degree to which the activities implemented in response to the 2017 EQF Recommendation have in directly led to the observed results and impacts. Contextually, a range of 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 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.

To **ensure quality of the analysis**, the methodological approach and all deliverables of the study were reviewed by an external quality assurance expert in the context of the study and were consulted and validated by DG EMPL and EQF Evaluation Inter-Service Group (ISG).

Figure 6 – Intervention logic



## ***Methodology and data sources***

The evaluation was based on a mixed-method data collection approach to provide a range of evidence that was triangulated to draw robust conclusions. The data collection approach included:

### **Exploratory interviews**

- Eight exploratory interviews were implemented at the outset of the study to inform the study design and identify key themes.

### **Country mapping and desk research**

- The contractor mapped the implementation progress in the 38 EQF<sup>104</sup> countries in the evaluation period and conducted a broader literature review to place the developments in the broader context.
- The country mapping mostly focused on EQF AG documents and Cedefop reports (e.g. NQF inventory), supplemented by targeted research of national level literature and documents.
- The desk research reviewed the existing knowledge base (including academic literature), analysing academic articles, public agencies and official reports, quantitative data sources, and legislative and policy documents.

### **Targeted consultation**

- Targeted online survey gathered experiences and suggestions about the 2017 EQF Recommendation from 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 and received 122 responses, of which 102 were complete and 20 were partial.
- Interviews with 21 EU level stakeholders were carried out between January 11 and February 21, 2023. They served to explore in-depth EQF developments at the EU level and to provide insights from EQF AG members and NCPs on the national level in the selected countries.

### **Case studies**

- To gain deeper insight into specific themes of the 2017 EQF Recommendation on the national level and the impact of the national context, the study included ten case studies across 15 EQF countries. The case studies were used to illustrate differences between countries within the wider perspective provided from all data collection methods combined. 131 national stakeholders were consulted within the case studies.

### **Public consultation and call for evidence**

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<sup>104</sup> 38 countries participate in the EQF process, representing 40 National Qualifications Frameworks. Given Belgium's federal structure and national arrangements, its three regions are represented separately.

- The public consultation was launched by the European Commission on 4 December 2022 until 22 February 2023. The questionnaire used to implement the survey was distributed using the online EU survey tool and was available in all official EU languages. 267 responses were received.

### **Validation workshop**

- An online validation workshop on April 17, 2023 gathered 25 representatives of EU and national-level stakeholders, representing 13 countries, to validate the study conclusions, to discuss study lessons learnt and future EQF perspectives.

See Annex V for more information on the consultations, and Annex 1 of the supporting study for further information on the methodology and data sources and Annex 9 of the supporting study for bibliography used in the evaluation.

### ***Research limitations 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 5 – Overview of limitations and corresponding mitigation measures*

<b>Limitation</b>	<b>Mitigation measures taken</b>
<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 (see Table 1).
The study focused on analysing the 2017 EQF Recommendation and thus its scope is limited to the EQF tool. However, it is not always 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 defined in a way that they cannot be quantified. This limits the possibility to assess the extent to which they 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.



Limitation	Mitigation measures taken
<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 monitoring 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 level. However, these overviews provide factual information and do not present stakeholder views or grasp national particularities. This is covered by case studies. Hence, the 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, which were selected to represent the different national approaches and NQF implementation status. 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 is a 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, different people have knowledge about different aspects of the EQF.	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 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 when 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 III. EVALUATION MATRIX (BY CRITERION)

The evaluation matrix serves as the organising framework of the evaluation work and the factual answers to the questions for each of the evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value). For the answers to each of the specific evaluation questions, please refer to the supporting study report, chapter 4, which is structured according to the five evaluation criteria.

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
Effectiveness									
1. To what extent and in what manner has the EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving its objectives?	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			x	x	x	x	x
	The EQF improved the conditions for lifelong learning by linking non-formal and informal learning to formal learning and supporting	The number of countries including non-formal qualifications in their NQF	x		x			x	
		The number of countries having further developed institutional		x				x	

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
	validation of learning outcomes in different settings	arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning since 2017 and this being linked to EQF							
		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 improved conditions for lifelong learning				x		x	x
2. To what extent and in what manner has the EQF Recommendation contributed to achieving the wider objectives	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	x		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.			x	x		x	
	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	

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
		Key stakeholders see that the EQF improved conditions for increased employability and labour market integration of learners and workers				x		x	x
3. Have there been any unintended consequences of the EQF Recommendation in reaching its objectives?	Unintended consequences identified	Stakeholder perceptions	x	x		x			
	Unintended consequences identified	Stakeholder perceptions	x	x		x			
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?	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		x				
	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		x				
	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		x	
	The 2017 EQF Recommendation promoted links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or systems taking into account the common principles on credit systems set out in Annex V	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 Annex V (development between 2017-2021)	x					x	
	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated countries to take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents by the competent	Number of countries where all newly issued qualification documents make reference to EQF levels (development between 2017-2021)	x		x	x		x	

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
	authorities, and/or registers of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.	Number of countries where registers of qualifications contain references to EQF levels (development between 2017-2021)							
	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		x				
	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		x			x	
		Number of countries sharing national qualification databases / registers on Europass platform and extent of coverage	x		x				
	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		x			x	x
	The 2017 EQF Recommendation stimulated actions towards the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF National	Number of countries that took actions towards the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF National Coordination Points	x		x				

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
	Coordination Points (EQF NCP) increased continuation and coordination of EQF NCP.	(EQF NCP) increased continuation and coordination of EQF NCP. having an operational EQF NCP (development between 2017-2021)							
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?	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	x	x	x		x	x	
		Key stakeholders see that NQFs are widened in scope (more education sectors, more qualifications) since 2017				x		x	
	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			
	The application of referencing criteria improved transparency, trust and cooperation between countries?	Key stakeholders see that the referencing of NQFs to the EQF contributes to higher levels of transparency, trust and cooperation between countries		x		x		x	
	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)		x	x			x	
		Key stakeholders see that the		x	x	x		x	
		application of the referencing process		x		x		x	



Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
		has improved comparability of qualifications							
	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		X	X	X		X	X
		Key stakeholders see that accessibility of information of EQF/NQF levels of qualification improved for different target groups	X			X		X	
	The interconnection between national qualifications registers and the Europass Platform allows to reach and inform more stakeholders about information on qualifications.	Key stakeholders see that the interconnection between national qualifications registers and the Europass Platform allows to reach and inform more stakeholders about information on qualifications.		X	X	X		X	
	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		X	X		X	
	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		X			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	

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
6. To what extent the EQF Recommendation contributed to the integration of migrants by gaining a better understanding and a fair recognition of qualifications awarded outside the Union?	The EQF increased understanding of the content and level of qualifications outside the Union	Number of cross-links between EQF and third country (countries that are not implementing EQF) Qualifications frameworks		x	x		x	x	
		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	
	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?	The national infrastructure supported the implementation and operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation	Key stakeholders indicate that the national infrastructure is engaging all national stakeholders			x	x	x		
	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		
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 9	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 10	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 11	x						

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 12	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 13	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 14	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 15	x	x					
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 16a	x						
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 16b	x			x			
	The European level recommendations is implemented	Activities are implemented related to recommendation 17	x						
	Assessment of implementation status	Stakeholder perceptions					x		
	The cooperation with third countries and international stakeholders increased	Occurrence and intensity of cooperation with third countries and international stakeholders		x		x			
	Assessment of cooperation with third countries	Stakeholder perceptions	x		x		x		
8. How effective have the working methods of the EQF governance structure been?	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		
9. To what extent and in what manner has the contribution of Cedefop and ETF supported the operationalisation of the EQF Recommendation?	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			

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
10. How have communication efforts around the EQF contributed to its implementation and the level of awareness of different stakeholders?	The communication activities increased awareness about the EQF	Effectiveness of communication activities in increasing awareness		X	X			X	X
		Key stakeholders indicate that communication efforts contributed to a higher level of awareness of different stakeholders		X	X	X		X	
Efficiency									
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)	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 events/conferences on EQF.		X		X			
	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	
	Not applicable	Qualitative description of benefits: - individuals		X	X				

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
		- economy - society							
	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?	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	
	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 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				x	x	x	
	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,	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,				x			

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
qualification registers, international qualifications, third country dimension) correspond to the various stakeholders’ needs? Are there missing elements or elements that are not needed?		referencing criteria, quality criteria, principles on credit systems, data elements of qualifications, qualification registers, international qualifications, third country dimension).							
	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	x				
	Not applicable	Gathering indications on missing elements or elements that are not needed.		x	x	x			
16. To what extent the objectives of the EQF Recommendation are still relevant in view of shifts in stakeholders’ and end-users needs?	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 asses 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?	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 asses the relevance of the objectives as high				x		x	x
		Literature reviews validate/extend key stakeholders’ relevance assessment	x	x		x			x



Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
Coherence									
18. To what extent have the objectives, target groups and measures of the EQF Recommendation been internally coherent?	The intervention logic of the Recommendation, as reconstructed by the evaluators and validated by key stakeholders, is coherent.	Degree of internal coherence of the intervention logic as assessed by evaluators and key stakeholders		x			x		
19. To what extent has the EQF Recommendation been coherent with other policy initiatives and related instruments? Are there synergies or overlaps	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		
	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		
	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		x		x	x		
EU added value									
20. Could the objectives of the EQF Recommendation have been sufficiently achieved by each Member State acting alone? To what extent the effects identified could have been achieved without EU intervention?	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 interested in doing so in the future	x						
		Main areas where the Recommendation has had an added value as identified by stakeholders		x		x			x

Question	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source						
			Country mapping	Desk research	NQF inventory	Targeted survey	Interviews EU level	Case studies	PC
		and on the basis of the effectiveness and efficiency analysis							
	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?	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
	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 Recommendation continue to require action at EU level?	Not applicable	Key stakeholders' opinion on the need for and added value of continuing actions at EU level on the issues addressed by the Recommendation		x		x			
<b>Cross-cutting</b>									
11: What lessons learnt can be drawn for the future development and implementation of the EQF Recommendation?	Identified lessons learned	Not applicable		x	x			x	

## ANNEX IV. OVERVIEW OF BENEFITS AND COSTS

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 of the EQF Advisory Group (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.

Table 6 – Cost-benefit overview

			Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
Direct and indirect compliance costs								
Costs related to the implementation of the EQF at national level								
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

Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
								most counties initiated 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	Recurrent	Not applicable		Not applicable		2.75 FTE and EUR 0.01 m in 2019	Cedefop staff provides expert support to the EQF AG as a whole and to individual EU

Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
	mobilisation of expertise						2.75 FTE and EUR 0.02 m in 2020 3.65 FTE and EUR 0.31 m in 2021 4 FTE and EUR 0.35 m in 2022	Member States. It offers support to the organisation of AG meetings, provides technical 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	Not available	NCP are a crucial prerequisite for effectively organising qualification frameworks at the national level, serving as single point of coordination for other

Cost/benefit	Cost/Benefit description	Type	Citizens/consumers		Businesses		Administrations	
			Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment
						expertise on EQF / NQF		national stakeholders, and bringing together all expertise on relevant developments in other EQF countries. The costs in relation to key activities of 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 V. STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATION - SYNOPSIS REPORT

This annex summarises all stakeholder consultation activities undertaken for this evaluation.

### 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 mix of consultation activities with a different scope and focus, in particular:

- Public consultation (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 recommendations.

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

**Error! Reference source not found.** provides an overview of stakeholders consulted and consultation activities applied. Each consultation activity is then discussed in more detail.

Table 7 - Stakeholders consulted per consultation activities

	Public consultation and call for evidence	Exploratory interviews	Interviews about EU level policies	Targeted online survey	Case study interviews	Validation workshop
EC, Cedefop, ETF		X	X			X
EQF AG national representatives	X	X	X	X	X	X
Other EQF AG members	X			X		X
EQF NCPs	X		X	X	X	X
ENIC-NARIC	X		X			
International experts	X		X			X
Third country representatives	X		X			
Public authorities	X			X	X	
EQF end users	X			X	X	
Education and training providers	X			X	X	

### **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. The PC was launched on December 14 and was open until March 22, 2023. In total 267 responses were received. **Error! Reference source not found.** provides details about respondents' type, type of country, organisation type and size. A summary report is available on the [Have your say portal](#).

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 responded to the call for evidence.

*Table 8 - 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>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</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>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%)

### **Exploratory interviews**

The objective of the exploratory interviews was to fine-tune the evaluation questions, indicators, and judgement criteria; to identify stakeholders relevant for the EQF; to inform the design of the questionnaires for the survey and PC; to identify key themes and trends for the case studies. Eight interviews were carried out between June 9 and 16, 2022: two with DG EMPL, one with ETF, one with Cedefop, and four with EQF Advisory Group (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 National Coordination Points (NCPs) on the national situation in selected countries. Interviews mostly 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 **Error! Reference source not found.** below.

*Table 9 – Stakeholders consulted about EU level policies*

Stakeholder (no of interviews)	Countries covered	Logic for selecting stakeholders
EQF AG members (6)	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Norway, Kosovo	Respondents who can provide a national perspective on EU level developments. Respondents who did not complete the survey in order ensure better overall country coverage and in order not to 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.
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>105</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	Representatives of third countries that cooperated with EQF were selected.
ETF representatives (1)	Not relevant	-

### **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.

The survey received 122 responses, of which 102 were complete and 20 were partial (see “Methodology for data processing” for explanation of approach to partial responses). 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).

<sup>105</sup> ENIC Network and NARIC Network (2019). [Report on the global dimension of the ENIC and NARIC Networks](#).

Table 10 – Stakeholders consulted via 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>106</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</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>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%)

### **Case study interviews with national stakeholders**

Consultations with national stakeholders were carried out as part of the case studies and were implemented by national experts as individual interviews and group interviews. The objective of these consultations was to collect stakeholders' inputs, 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.

Table 11 – Stakeholder consulted via interviews at national level (case studies)

			Countries														
		Total	CZ	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	IE	LT	NL	PL	PT <sup>107</sup>	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 users	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
Mode	Interviewee	99	7	5	10	7	2	5	13	8	11	6	1	6	5	8	5
	Group interviews	31	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	5	3	0	9	10	0	0

### **Validation workshop**

<sup>106</sup> Not for profit organisations, research institutions, freelancers, experts, counsellors, National Europass Centre, national council for development of human potential.

<sup>107</sup> Only two stakeholders were consulted in Portugal as the case study mainly focused on factual information (e.g. databases, credit systems) and the insights gained were deemed sufficient.

A three-hour online validation workshop was organised on April 17, 2023. The workshop aimed to present and validate the evaluation findings and to discuss lessons learnt and future perspective of the EQF. 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**

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, and 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 a full response, using Alchemer<sup>TM</sup> tool, it was checked if responses were submitted from the same device. 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 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 discussion points of the validation workshop were collected in a 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 its 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 (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 by consulted stakeholders, mainly public authorities and authorities working with qualifications. 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** (e.g. ES, FR). Where this is not the case, the 2017 EQF Recommendation is expected to be less visible (e.g. DE, IT).

Stakeholders consulted also provided concrete **examples of the EQF increasing their understanding of qualifications**. Around half (130 out of 229 or 57%) of 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.

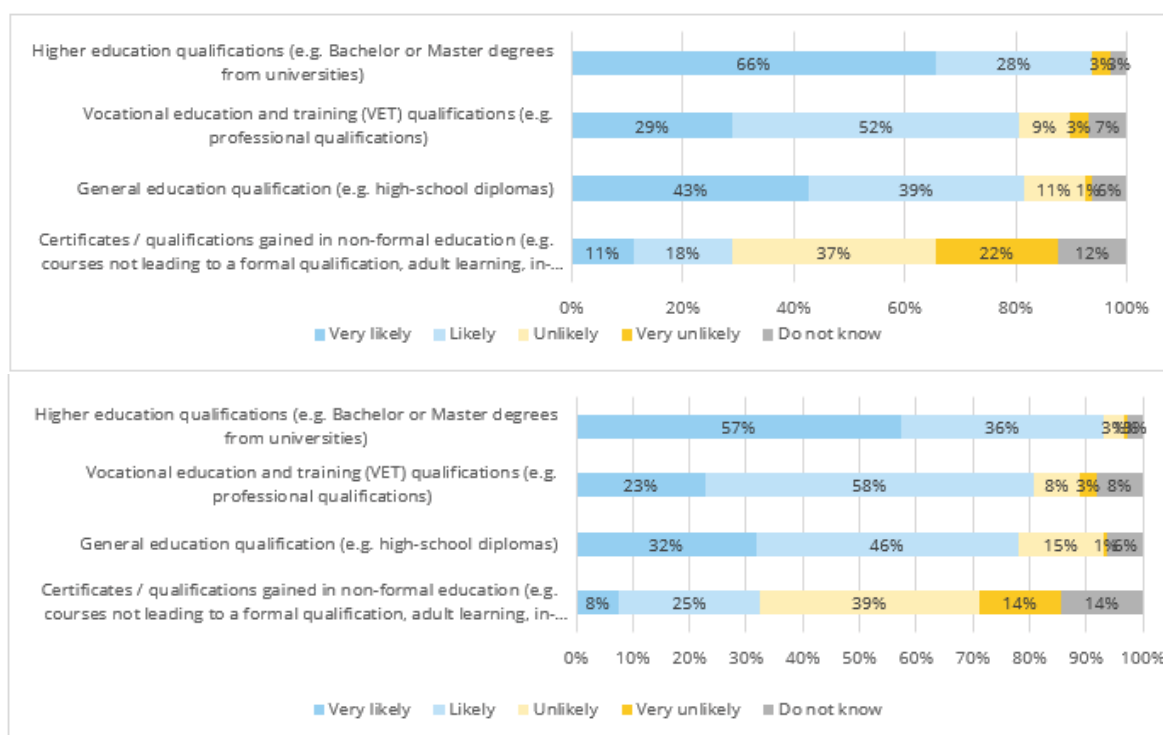
- *Improved recognition of qualifications.* The vast majority of PC respondents (citizens, national and local authorities) thought that it is **likely or very likely for qualifications from formal education to be recognised** by education and training providers and



employers in another EQF country (see Figure 7 below), also providing 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) agreed 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 expressed **doubts about the recognition of qualifications gained in non-formal education**, with 85 or 59% considering this as unlikely or very unlikely (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

- *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 7 -How likely it is to recognise the following:



#### 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 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) agreed that the 2017 **EQF Recommendation informed debates about education and training systems**. This is further substantiated by results from the PC as the large majority of respondents (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, with no differences across stakeholder types or country of origin.

#### 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>108</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>109</sup> This could be explained with the difficulty to draw a direct causal link to the EQF. At the same time, anecdotal evidence from four country case studies (Germany, Finland, Serbia, France) offers 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

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<sup>108</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>109</sup> Survey: up to 41%; PC: up to 34%.

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) **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**

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' countries**. This share is even higher for respondents from countries that completed their referencing during the evaluation period. When the same question was asked about the implementation of EQF 2017 Recommendation in other countries, most of the same respondents did not know or could not answer (70 out of 120 or 58%), showing that awareness about developments in other countries is limited.

#### Strengthening implementation of the EQF through referencing

Interviews with national stakeholders, representing public authorities, authorities working with qualifications and education and training providers, from Germany (five respondents) and Slovenia (five respondents) 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.

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 and education and training providers) or **were not able to answer** (39 out of 118 or 33%, mainly end beneficiaries) 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 agreed that the 2017 EQF Recommendation support 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 some interviewed case study national stakeholders (Poland, Serbia) indicate that the 2017 EQF Recommendation kept the momentum for operationalising their NQFs, others (France, Ireland, 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 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, 69 (67%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the EQF recommendation 3 and Annex IV<sup>110</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, do not assign QA developments to the 2017 EQF Recommendation, as these mostly occurred before the

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<sup>110</sup> Annex providing principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

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 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>111</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 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 EQF end users 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 qualifications across countries (100 of 118 or 85%). Survey results also show **increase in communication efforts**, as around half (60 of 105 or 57%) of the respondents reported that national communication efforts since 2017 have increased awareness of the EQF among relevant stakeholders. 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 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 stakeholder 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

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<sup>111</sup> Annex providing principles for credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

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.

EQF AG and NCPs who responded to the survey selected:

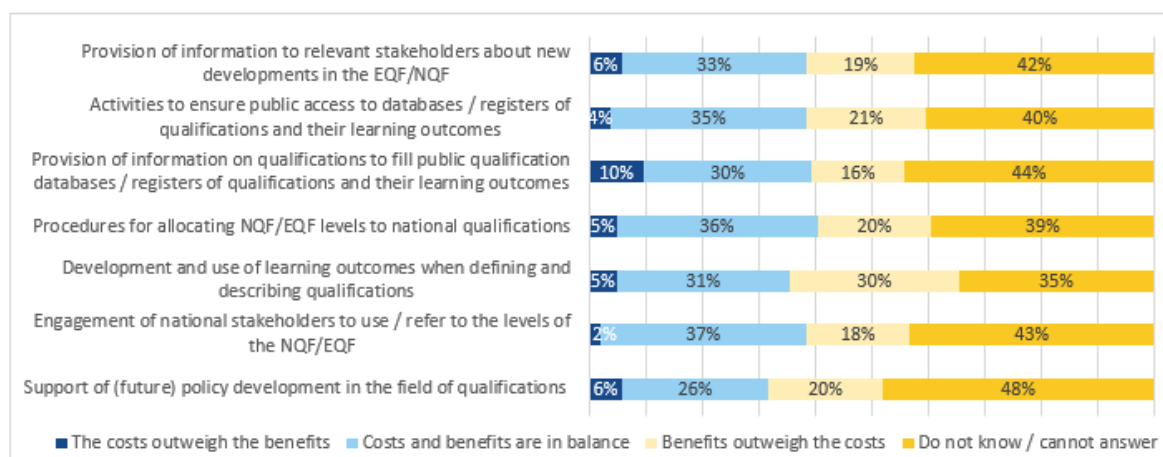


- Erasmus+ EU funding as the main source of funding for activities at the EU level (24 out of 44 or 55%) while this is the second option for activities at the national level (17 out of 44 or 39%).
- National contributions as the main source for activities at the national level (24 out of 44 or 55%), 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 the 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 **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 **Error! Reference source not found.** 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>112</sup>.

Figure 8 – Assessment of efficiency



### Efficiency of the work of the EQF Advisory Group and individual actors

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) reduces costs while keeping the level of productivity stable. Despite the overall positive perception, some broad **challenges** were observed by

<sup>112</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.

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 AG were asked to provide their assessment on the efficiency of its work. Around 18 out of 40<sup>113</sup> (45%) of the respondents thought that costs and benefits were roughly in balance, with around 12 out of 40<sup>114</sup> (30%) indicating that the benefits outweigh the costs. Only a small minority (around 2 out of 40 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 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**. In particular, interviewees 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 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) 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 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

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<sup>113</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>114</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%).



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 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 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). Romanian and Finnish stakeholders 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 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>115</sup>) and PC (160-177 out of 229 or 70-77%<sup>116</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 lower, with 27 out of 102 or 26% assessing the contribution as

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<sup>115</sup> Numbers are provided in interval as respondents were asked to separately evaluate: 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>116</sup> See footnote 80.

“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 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 and the development of qualifications and their frameworks:

- 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 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:

- 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). 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, 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 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 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 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, 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).