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# Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning



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# **EXPLAINING THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING**



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**  
Education and Culture

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



# EXPLAINING THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

## Key questions and answers<sup>1</sup>

This note is written for those policy makers and experts who are involved in implementing the EQF. The note is the first in a series of EQF reference documents supporting the implementation of the EQF.

## The EQF

The proposal for the European Qualifications Framework was launched by the European Commission in September 2006. This recommendation outlines an overarching framework to be set up in Europe to facilitate comparison of qualifications and qualifications levels in order to promote geographical and labour market mobility as well as lifelong learning. The core of the framework consists of 8 qualifications levels described through learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence). Countries are invited to relate their national qualifications levels to the neutral reference established by the EQF. Following the adoption by the European Parliament and Council (December 2007), a process of implementation will start in 2008. Those countries deciding to go along with the EQF (it is a voluntary process) will be asked to do this in two stages. The first stage – referring national qualifications levels to the EQF – should be completed by 2010. The second – introducing a reference to the EQF in all new certificates – should be completed by 2012.

## EQF – new perspectives, new approaches

The EQF represents a new approach to European cooperation in the field of qualifications. The introduction of a set of learning outcomes based reference levels/descriptors spanning all forms of qualifications and the entire range of qualifications levels have not been attempted previously. Successful implementation of the EQF therefore requires that everybody involved shares a clear understanding of:

- The objectives and main intended functions of the framework;
- the principles and logic applied when defining the framework (how were the descriptors constructed, how should they be read?);
- the requirements to implementation (in terms of stakeholder involvement, transparency, quality assurance and peer review).

This note – by answering 12 frequently asked questions – concentrates on explaining the basic principles and logic of the European Qualifications Framework. The note addresses those policy makers and experts who are involved in the implementation of the EQF (and corresponding frameworks and solutions) at national, sectoral or regional level.

The following questions – which can be read separately – are included and explained:

1. Why is the EQF called a ‘Meta-framework’?
2. What are the principles behind the EQF descriptors and what is the significance of their wording?
3. What is meant by ‘Knowledge, Skills and Competence’ and why do we use these terms?
4. Why aren’t there more dimensions as in other frameworks?
5. Isn’t competence the overall notion for all learning? Isn’t the EQF a framework of competences?
6. Is it possible to relate a qualification to different levels?
7. Is one column of the descriptors table more important than the other?
8. Does the EQF have to be seen as a ladder? Do all steps have to be taken to reach a qualification on a certain level?
9. Can the descriptors of the EQF also be used for National Qualifications Frameworks?
10. Why are certain key competences, e.g. ‘learning to learn’, not part of the EQF?
11. Can the EQF be used to classify education programmes and occupations?

<sup>1</sup> The note has been written by Jörg Markowitsch, Karin Luomi-Messerer and Sonja Lengauer of 3S Research Laboratory, Vienna and Jens Bjornavold, Cedefop. Michael Graham, Georg Hanf and Mike Coles have worked on the text and added comments.

12. What is the relationship between the EQF and the framework for the European Higher Education Area?

### **1. Why is the EQF called a ‘Meta-framework’?**

The EQF has been designed to act as a reference for different qualifications systems and frameworks in Europe. It takes into account the diversity of national systems and facilitates the translation and comparison of qualifications between countries. In this sense the EQF is a framework for frameworks and/or systems and it can therefore be defined as a ‘Meta-framework’. (A qualifications framework can be seen as part of a qualifications system in which the levels of qualifications are explicitly described in a single hierarchy.)

This meta-framework will enable qualifications systems with their implicit levels or/and national and sectoral qualifications frameworks to relate to each other. In the process of implementing the EQF it is intended that each country will reference its national qualifications (in terms of diplomas, certificates or awards) to the eight EQF levels via national qualifications frameworks or the implicit levels in the national qualifications systems. This means that in the first stage levels of national qualifications frameworks or parts of qualifications systems will be referred to the EQF levels. In the long run, all qualifications awarded in Europe should have a reference to the EQF.

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***A specific national qualification is, for example, a ‘master diploma for pastry cook’ in Germany or a ‘baccalauréat technologique’ in France.***

***A level of a National Qualifications Framework is, for example, the ‘National Clusters at Access Level 2’ in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) or the ‘Junior Certificate at Level 3’ in Ireland.***

***A part of a National Qualifications System is, for example, represented by the qualifications provided by the ‘Secondary Technical and Vocational Schools’ in Austria or the qualifications provided by ‘Colleges (Főiskola)’ as part of higher education in Hungary.***

***Examples for other international frameworks are the ‘European e-competence Framework’ as an***

***international sectoral framework or the ‘Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs)’.***

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### **2. What are the principles behind the EQF descriptors and what is the significance of their wording?**

The descriptors have been written to cover the full range of learning outcomes, irrespective of the learning or institutional context from basic education, through school and unskilled worker levels up to doctoral or senior professional levels. They cover both work and study situations, academic as well as vocational settings, and initial as well as continuing education or training, i.e. all forms of learning formal, non-formal and informal.

In addition, the descriptors reflect both specialisations and generalisations. Thus, reaching a higher level does not necessarily imply that the required skills and knowledge will be more specialised, although this might be the case in many academic and research contexts. Moving from a lower to a higher level, in some study or work contexts, can also mean becoming more of a generalist.

The descriptors have been written to sufficiently distinguish between descriptors from the level below or the level above and show, from the previous level, distinct progress in dimensions of change (e.g. complexity of knowledge, see also question 8). Each level builds on and subsumes the levels beneath. However, in order to keep the table and the text as clear as possible, repetitions are avoided and the descriptors of the respective previous levels are implicitly included.

To achieve, at the same time, continuity, as well as discreteness, key words have been used to characterize levels (e.g. ‘factual and theoretical knowledge’, in contrast to ‘basic knowledge’ on the lower levels or ‘specialised knowledge’ on the higher levels; or ‘supervision’ of the work/study activities of others which come in at level 4 and 5, but are not relevant at levels below). These key words can also be understood as indicators of threshold levels. A full understanding of one particular level therefore requires a ‘horizontal as well as vertical reading’ where lower and higher levels are taken into account (see also question 7).

Further criteria for formulating the descriptors were: to use only positive statements; to avoid jargon; to apply definite and concrete statements (e.g. avoiding terms like ‘appropriate’) and at the same time to be as simple and generic as possible. Thus, the descriptors of the present EQF table are deliberately rather generic, e.g. in comparison to previous versions (see also question 1 and 9). The column titles were pragmatically chosen to use simple and comprehensible terms, instead of possibly more precise, technical terms used by a small group of experts (see also question 3).

### **3. What is meant by ‘Knowledge, Skills and Competence’ and why do we use these terms?**

There are many different possibilities for structuring and constituting the results of learning processes. Following discussions between technical experts from all countries involved in the development of the EQF it was agreed to use the distinction between knowledge, skills and competence (KSC) as basis of the framework, because it is the most established way for categorising learning outcomes.

Clearly, this categorisation was inspired by and connected to other, very similar, differentiations in learning outcomes. In France, for example, one generally distinguishes between *savoir*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être*; in the German-speaking countries, the common differentiation is between *Fachkompetenz*, *Methodenkompetenz*, *Personalkompetenz* and *Sozialkompetenz*; while in the English-speaking countries, the conventional categorisation is between ‘cognitive competence’, ‘functional competence’ and ‘social competence’.

The EQF’s differentiation between knowledge, skills and competence can therefore be seen as a pragmatic agreement between the various, widespread approaches and does not oblige countries to do the same. National or sectoral frameworks or systems may require different approaches, taking into account specific traditions and needs (see also questions 4 and 9).

The KSC differentiation of learning outcomes helps to clearly construct descriptors and to more easily classify

the levels of qualifications. Nevertheless, these three categories (KSC) should not be read in isolation from each other, but they should be collectively perceived. Thus, to grasp the characteristics of one level requires also ‘horizontal reading’ (see also question 6). Similarities may exist between the categories (e.g. the column ‘competence’ includes certain skills; the column ‘skills’ also contains certain forms of knowledge) but this is in the nature of things.

### **4. Other qualifications frameworks use more or other categories or dimensions instead of knowledge, skills and competence. Are qualifications frameworks with other dimensions at all comparable?**

In national, regional or sectoral qualifications frameworks, descriptors can be adapted to their respective aims and objectives (e.g. country-specific or sector-specific needs). That’s why there is no general or only one valid way to use descriptors; different ways are possible.

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*In the Scottish framework, for example, there is a differentiation between ‘Knowledge and Understanding’, ‘Practice: Applied Knowledge and Understanding’, ‘Generic Cognitive Skills’, ‘Communication, ICT Skills and Numeracy’, and ‘Autonomy, Accountability and Working with Others’. In Ireland, the following categories are used: ‘Breadth of Knowledge’, ‘Kind of Knowledge, Range of Know-How & Skill’, ‘Selectivity of Know-How & Skill’, ‘The Context of Competence’, ‘Role of Competence’, ‘The Competence Learning to Learn’, and ‘Insight (Competence)’.*

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The EQF was designed to have the fewest and simplest possible differentiations (see also question 3). The EQF can be seen as focussing on the most essential and substantial aspects. The interpretation of the EQF descriptors is made simpler because they take account of very similar descriptors in existing qualifications frameworks and because they enable comparability and allocation/relation.

### **5. Some say that the EQF ought not to be a qualifications framework, but a compe-**



**tences framework. Some even suggested that ‘competences’ would be the adequate umbrella term for the table. Is this right and what is meant?**

The EQF is a (meta-)qualifications framework and not a competences framework, because it enables the classification of qualifications levels and systems. It is not intended to be used for the classification of individual competences. It is a learning-outcome orientated framework, in which the descriptors describe all forms of learning outcomes. The misunderstanding of the EQF as a competences framework is due to the fact that learning outcomes are formulated as statements about what the learners can do and so provide a certain ‘competence orientation’. The EQF is also, insofar, not a competences framework, as learning outcomes can, for example, also be knowledge without any corresponding competences or skills.

Learning outcomes are consequently always more comprehensive than competences and not the reverse. Hence, competences would not be the adequate umbrella term for the table. More correctly, the EQF should be called a ‘qualifications framework based on learning outcomes’.

**6. Part of a national qualifications system seems to fit perfectly on a certain level in one of the three columns, but according to another dimension it would fit better on another level. Is it possible to relate one and the same group of qualifications to different levels?**

No, because the EQF is not a system to classify qualifications according to different dimensions. In other words, the EQF table should not be read as separate columns. To read one level means that the whole line (all three columns) must be read all the way across and, in addition, each level descriptor assumes inclusion of the outcomes for the levels below. Thus, a full understanding of a particular level requires that it should be read in relation to the preceding levels (see also questions 2 and 3).

Due to the nature of Europe’s extensive qualifications systems and diverse qualifications, quite often parts

(a group of qualifications) of a national qualifications systems will fit into a certain level in one column, whereas at the same time they fit into another level of another column. There might be very different qualifications according to the complexity of knowledge or the range of skills required, but they can be just as difficult to achieve.

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*For example, ‘Le baccalauréat général’ in France or the ‘General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)’ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland might require more theoretical and factual knowledge, but less practical skills; whereas, the apprenticeship-exam in Germany or Austria might require more practical skills and less theoretical knowledge in a field.*

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Presentation of the EQF descriptors in a table with three columns should facilitate understanding of the EQF and the assignment of qualifications. If the table format results in contradictory interpretations, the columns should be seen as of secondary importance. Consequently, this means, that one should simply read the whole line (knowledge, skills and competence) and judge – all in all – in which of the levels the group of qualifications fits best. This way of reading the descriptors will help to establish ‘the centre of gravity’ of the qualification in question and thus make it possible to decide where to place it in relation to the EQF. This illustrates that due to the diversity of qualifications at national and sector level there will never be a perfect or absolute fit to the EQF levels - the principle of best fit has to be applied instead.

**7. Is one column of the descriptors table more important than the other?**

Existing qualifications will vary considerably as regards their focus on knowledge, skills or competence. E.g. academic qualifications might focus more on knowledge, whereas certain vocational qualifications might focus more on skills or competence. The three dimensions introduced in the EQF should help to identify these differences in the process of assigning qualifications. By no means the EQF intends to promote or to discriminate any type of qualification, but to act as neutral reference point for all different sorts of qualifications. An important objective underpinning



the EQF is the promotion of parity of esteem between academic, vocational or higher education routes as well as between initial and further education. In this sense, all the dimensions of the table are of equal value.

A qualification may fit perfectly in a certain level in one of the columns, but according to the descriptors in another column, at first sight, may seem to fit better in another level (see also question 3). One could therefore – or simply because the column ‘knowledge’ comes before ‘skills’ – ask if a certain column has more importance than the others. This is not the case. All of the dimensions are equally important and the order of the columns is not meant to be of any particular consequence (see also question 6).

**8. Does the EQF have to be seen as a ladder? Do all steps have to be taken to reach a qualification at a certain level? If yes, why is the ladder ending at the eighth step, since the EQF is a framework for lifelong learning? Can somebody also acquire qualifications on different levels or does only the highest one count?**

The EQF is a ladder in the sense that from level 1 to level 8 the associated learning becomes more complex and makes greater demands on the learner or worker. Increases in level 1 to 8 relate to different factors such as:

- the complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding;
- the degree of necessary support or instruction;
- the degree of integration, independence and creativity required;
- the range and complexity of application/practice;
- the degree of transparency and dynamics of situations.

This list certainly is not comprehensive, as learning has many relevant dimensions, some which we might not even know. It should only indicate what is meant by ‘increasingly greater demands on learners/workers.’

Understanding the EQF as a ladder with 8 steps does not mean that it is necessary to differentiate the same number of levels in all national contexts, fields,

sectors or domains. National qualifications systems or frameworks might include more or less levels.

In some fields, sectors or domains there might be no qualifications on a higher level available. In others there might be no qualifications at the lower levels existing or there might even be qualifications which go beyond the level 8. The EQF does not further differentiate between qualifications on level 8 and above.

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***For example, it is very unlikely that there are qualifications in the field of pharmacy at the lowest level, or it is very unlikely to find qualifications at the higher levels in the area of housekeeping and cleaning (although there might be exceptions).***

***In many countries a PhD will be ranked at a level that corresponds to level 8 in the EQF and in some countries there might exist even further post-doctoral formal qualifications in a university career, such as the ‘habilitation’ in the German speaking countries. Another example is in the field of accounting, many countries require, in addition to a university degree, five to ten years experience and completion of further examinations before issuing certificates for public accountant).***

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The EQF is not an instrument for directly documenting individual learning progresses but to provide – in the first stage – a translation device between different national contexts and – on the long run – a reference tool for all qualifications issued in Europe. However, indicating EQF levels for qualifications does not mean that qualifications necessarily have to be acquired in the same sequence as the EQF levels:

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***For example: An apprenticeship certificate is related to e.g. level 3. After some years of work experience and further training within the company, a graduate of apprenticeship training wants to continue his or her learning career at a university (e.g. level 5). Within these particular national regulations, these skills and competencies acquired informally are accepted as entrance qualification for higher education instead of a formal qualification on level 4. After successful completion of the higher education***

*programme, this person is awarded a qualification, classified on level 5. Therefore, the person has received a formal qualification on level 3 and one on level 5, but not on level 4. It looks like this person has skipped the level 4. But, actually the person commands the necessary knowledge, skills and competence on level 4 at the beginning of the study programme, because it is an entrance requirement even though no formal qualification was awarded.*

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Over their lifetime, learners will primarily move from a lower to a higher level, but it is also possible to gain two different qualifications at the same level or to move from a higher to a lower level of qualification, if new learning is taken on and new skills are acquired.

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*For example, a person with a doctorate in engineering decides to study a new field such as economics, which might be placed at a lower level.*

*Over a lifetime, many reasons like diseases, new interests and hobbies or unemployment can motivate a person to obtain new qualifications on lower levels, than the one he or she might have obtained before. For example, in addition to qualification and employment as an IT specialist, one might, for example, be interested in obtaining certain qualifications in the leisure industry (e.g. tour guiding, skiing instructor). This second qualification can also be related to a lower level than the original qualification.*

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### **9. Can the descriptors of the EQF also be used for National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF)?**

The purposes of qualifications frameworks vary according to their context (either international, national, regional or sectoral comparison); therefore, the specific design of the frameworks will also differ. The EQF is designed as a meta-framework (see question 1) and consequently uses more generic descriptors than most national, regional or sectoral frameworks.

The EQF descriptors do not substitute for the descriptors of other qualifications frameworks. But obviously, the structure and number of levels of

these other descriptors can be orientated towards the EQF. That means the EQF descriptors should not be used as a blueprint for the development of other frameworks without clearly considering and reflecting the respective needs. However, the EQF descriptors can be used as a starting point for this process and they can be changed, complemented etc. if appropriate.

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*An example for the alignment with the EQF can be found in the emerging NQF in Malta or in Lithuania which both encompass eight levels. The emerging NQF in Malta even uses a similar structure to the EQF by referring to knowledge, skills, and competence.*

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### **10. Why are certain competences like key competences or meta-competences (e.g. awareness for sustainable development, learning to learn or ethical competences) not mentioned in the EQF?**

The EQF does not make any statements about the specific content of learning outcomes. What a country or society considers at the present or future as key competences (e.g. competence of foreign languages, communicative competence, entrepreneurial competence, cultural competence) might change between countries and societies, but also changes over time. The EQF does not refer to any specific key competences, but can cover all different types of key competences at different levels. There are also some other, more general, competences like 'learning to learn' or 'ethical competence', which have not been explicitly included in the EQF. These features, often referred to as meta-competences, have not been included because they cannot be seen independently from other knowledge, skills and competence. Thus, they have not been added as an additional dimension, but should be seen as an integral part of knowledge, skills and competence. For example, learning to learn plays an important role for gaining theoretical and factual knowledge; ethical competence is important for the development of autonomy and responsibility.

## **11. Can the EQF be used for classifying educational programmes and occupations?**

The EQF was not designed to classify educational programmes or occupations, but instead focuses on qualifications systems and frameworks. The EQF levels do not reflect participation in any particular education programmes or competences required for particular tasks or occupations. Of course, qualifications are related to education and training and to the occupational world and these elements are very important in the EQF. ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) and ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) are classifications specifically designed to classify education and occupations. The EQF only partially implies a hierarchy of educational programmes (e.g. a qualification on a higher level in the EQF very likely will correspond to a higher level on the ISCED levels) and a hierarchy of occupations (e.g. a qualification on a lower EQF level will very likely lead to an occupational activity ranked on a lower level in the ISCO skill levels). However, the EQF focuses on learning outcomes in the form of knowledge, skills and competence; these are seen autonomously of education programmes or occupational contexts.

The EQF thus constitutes a new instrument, which offers the possibility to combine educational and occupational taxonomies and, in a way, bridges ISCED and ISCO.

## **12. What is the relationship between the EQF and the framework for the European Higher Education Area?**

At the European level, the development of qualifications frameworks began with a qualifications framework for one education sector: The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) has been formed since 1999 (Bologna Declaration; the Dublin descriptors were adopted in 2005); whereas, the development of the EQF started in 2005. The two frameworks clearly have similarities and overlapping areas: both are meta-frameworks, cover a broad scope of learning and are designed to improve transparency with regard to qualifications within Europe. They are both associated with quality assurance and use the

concept of 'best fit' to determine levels. Both also have clear aspirations to support lifelong learning and labour mobility.

Despite these obvious similarities between the two frameworks, differences can also be observed with regard to their aims and the descriptors used. The QF-EHEA intends to harmonise systems whereas the EQF intends to relate systems to each other: One central objective of the Bologna process is to harmonise the European higher education systems by introducing common degree structures (three-cycles degree system). The EQF, on the other hand, is not an instrument for harmonising qualifications or parts of qualifications systems but it is intended to function as a type of translation device to make relationships between qualifications and different systems clearer.

To link these two meta-frameworks, the EQF document asserts compatibility with the QF-EHEA. A main reason for drawing the higher levels of the EQF directly on the EHEA descriptors is to avoid the development of two isolated frameworks. Thus, the learning outcomes of certain EQF levels correspond to the cycle descriptors of the QF-EHEA. There is a clear cross-referencing at levels 5 to 8. Thus, the QF-EHEA's respective cycle descriptors – developed by the Joint Quality Initiative, as part of the Bologna process – are understood to be compatible with the descriptors for levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. Although different descriptors are used, both frameworks have a common view of the dimensions of progression regarding knowledge, skills (application) and professional conduct.

However, since the EQF is an overarching framework and seeks to include different forms of learning (not only learning in higher education but also more professional oriented qualifications), the descriptors are broader, more generic and have to be more encompassing than the Dublin descriptors applied to define the levels for the QF-EHEA. This means that the levels can be seen as equivalent, although the level descriptors are not the same. Consequently, EQF levels 5 to 8 can be compatible not only with qualification degrees acquired in formal way by studying in a higher education institution, but also with vocational

qualifications awarded through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

In the QF-EHEA, learning outcomes are understood as descriptions of what a learner is expected to know, to understand and to do at the end of the respective cycle. The Dublin descriptors refer to the following five dimensions: 'knowledge and understanding', 'applying knowledge and understanding', 'making judgements', 'communication' and 'learning skills'. Whereas the first three dimensions are mainly covered by the knowledge and skills dimensions in the EQF, the EQF does not explicitly refer to key competences such as communication, or meta-competences, such as learning to learn. These are partly included in an inherent manner in all the columns, but can mainly be assumed in the competence column (see also question 10).

Although the descriptors defining levels in the EQF and the Dublin descriptors differ, the EQF level descriptors fully integrate the Bologna descriptors and are thus compatible to these.

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***For example, the learning outcomes relevant to EQF level 7 comprise, among other things, 'specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields.' Accordingly, the second cycle of the QF-EHEA refers to the 'originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context.' Or, the learning outcomes of EQF level 8 include to 'demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research' and the third cycle of the QF-EHEA refers to the 'contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication' and to the capability 'of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas.'***

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