



# ***NQF-SQF***

National Qualifications Frameworks  
Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks

**Common grounds for referencing NQFs and SQFs  
to the EQF**

Progress Report

Public Part

## Project information

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Beneficiary organisation: DEKRA Akademie GmbH

Project coordinator: Gerald Thiel  
Project coordinator organisation: DEKRA Akademie GmbH  
Project coordinator telephone number: +49 177 9298707  
Project coordinator email address: [gerald.thiel@dekra-akademie.com](mailto:gerald.thiel@dekra-akademie.com)

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## Executive Summary

Following the philosophy of the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*, *learning outcomes* should be basically describable for all qualifications by using the descriptors *knowledge, skills, and competence* in a similar way, regardless of their origin in terms of country or organisation responsible for maintaining and monitoring structures in which they are embedded. A mere description in EQF terms, however, cannot dispel any doubts about the real value of these learning outcomes. For the EQF *as such* does not deliver enough criteria for assessment and comparison of qualifications: These descriptors leave a lot of room for interpretations with regard to the *level* to which the qualifications have to be allocated.

It is therefore important *how national and sectoral qualification frameworks are referenced* to the EQF: A *reference* of national or sectoral frameworks to the EQF should deliver a link that needs no further discussion and ensures that everybody understands the relationship between EQF and national/sectoral frameworks in the same way. However, in a situation where qualification frameworks are not available in every European country, every educational area, and occupational sector at the same level of development, it does not surprise that a common understanding of appropriate referencing these frameworks to the EQF does not exist. But as the EQF is not intended to serve as a regulation of European education, institutional aspects do not play a primary role, and organisations responsible for frameworks of any kind are encouraged to reference them to the EQF. Due to non-existent general referencing criteria, this should cause problems especially where qualification systems/frameworks compete or at least exist separately from each other: This is the case for national qualifications frameworks administered by public bodies and sectoral qualification frameworks supervised by (private) sectoral organisations; but it concerns also “isolated” sector-oriented qualifications.<sup>1</sup>

The overall aim of the project NQF-SQF is to *create common grounds for referencing national qualifications frameworks and sectoral qualifications/competence frameworks to the EQF*, thereby providing for *comparability of qualifications* on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of *abilities* required by *work processes*. This shall be enabled by the use of an *instrument to be developed within the project*: the *employability grid*. This grid shall be applicable for the assessment of qualifications as well as for the evaluation of frameworks these qualifications refer to. It shall test how far descriptions of frameworks and qualifications make visible what the learning outcomes of qualification processes are in terms of work process requirements, thus supporting employment at the European labour market.

Currently available in a draft version, this instrument shall in the second part of the funding period be used in order to design *typologies of national and sectoral*

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<sup>1</sup> The EQF recommendation of the European Parliament allows national qualification frameworks as well as sectoral qualification frameworks to be directly linked to the EQF, see *RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, p.2*. The EQF Advisory Group, dealing with the described problem of competition, now suggests that sectoral frameworks should in the future only be related to the EQF via national qualification frameworks. This might help to clarify the lines of conflict, but it does not finally solve the problem: If understandings of EQF descriptors differ, this should now become obvious in direct confrontation. This makes it all the more necessary to identify criteria for generally acceptable interpretations.

*frameworks*, leading to recommendations for enhancing referenceability of frameworks, and encompassing a work process relationship criterion which can be added to the catalogue of referencing criteria already defined by the EQF Advisory Group.

On the basis of this work, a *structure of future collaboration between private/public stakeholders* at European level shall be set up that shall be arranged around a *nucleus of already collaborating stakeholders*: the *EQF Advisory Group* and *EQF national contact points*.

The composition of the project consortium (twelve private/ public partners from nine European countries) reflects the project objectives: Some partners belong to the EQF Advisory Group or fulfil the role of national EQF contact points, others are closely linked to them: Existing networks should help to mobilise all expertise necessary to achieve the above described goals.

They should not only be useful for reaching *experts* in the field, but also those who are provided to be *end users* of the EQF: *organisations of various origin and individuals*. The project shall help to overcome the “EQF information divide”; it is therefore planned to put considerable efforts into relevant activities and to orient the above mentioned structure of collaboration between private and public stakeholders to this goal.

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## Project Objectives

The overall aim of the project is to *create common grounds for referencing national qualifications frameworks and sectoral qualifications/competence frameworks to the EQF*, thereby providing for *comparability of qualifications* on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of *abilities* required by *work processes*. This shall be enabled by the use of an *instrument to be developed within the project: the employability grid*<sup>2</sup>. This grid shall be applicable for the assessment of qualifications as well as for the evaluation of frameworks to which qualifications refer; it shall be able to test how far descriptions of frameworks and qualifications make visible what the learning outcomes of qualification processes are in terms of work process requirements, thus supporting employment in the European labour market.

The instrument will be used in order to draft *typologies of national and sectoral frameworks*, leading to recommendations for enhancing referenceability of frameworks. On the basis of these improved framework descriptions, similar national/sectoral qualifications/occupational profiles shall be compared for selected sectors. The results of these piloting activities will be used for final refinement of the employability grid.

The whole process of drafting typologies and comparing qualifications/profiles is considered in order to find out which work process oriented criteria for referenceability of frameworks can be determined, and which can possibly be added to the catalogue of referencing criteria already defined by the EQF Advisory Group.

Using the results of this evaluation as a starting point, a *model of collaboration between private/public stakeholders* at European level will be drafted, to be supported by partnerships at national level. This model shall be flexible enough to match continuously changing work process requirements, but at the same time cover the need of stability in terms of transparent and reliable rules of referencing.

The structure of collaboration will be arranged around a *nucleus of already collaborating stakeholders*: the EQF Advisory Group and EQF national contact points. The project consortium, encompassing some of these stakeholders and further partners embedded in networks which could open doors for extending the planned community, will apply a dissemination strategy intending to overcome the “EQF information divide” between EQF experts and possible users, thereby strengthening the role of the planned community of collaborating stakeholders, and creating a “zone of mutual trust” for smooth future use of the EQF by all kinds of stakeholders.

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<sup>2</sup> This name was chosen since the ability to fulfill tasks within concrete work processes is crucial for being employed. This does not exclude that there are additional reasons for getting a job.

# Project Approach

The project approach can be divided into two areas:

1. The development of a *methodology usable for refining mechanisms of referencing national and sectoral qualification frameworks to the EQF* is the core issue of the project. The main idea that underlies the project activities carried out in order to draft this methodology is to set up an instrument which is called the *employability grid*: Starting from the *work process* that is understood as an ensemble of activities steered by a common goal (to deliver a *product* or a *service*), then defining the main issues of the work process understood that way, it can be determined which *abilities* can be identified that correspond to it. Since it is assumed that the EQF descriptors *knowledge, skills, and competence* basically include components relevant for this purpose (if this not the case, this would mean that EQF relevant features of qualifications have nothing to do with work), they are analysed from this *work perspective*.

This analysis is led by the following reflection: If a general work orientation of the EQF can be identified, it makes senses to suppose that *differences in EQF levels* correspond to *differences in work positions*. Against this background, it is reasonable to investigate if a *levelling logic* exists which is based on this correspondence. This kind of logic can only be an *implicit* one; otherwise it would have been described together with the EQF descriptors.

The result of this analysis refers to two issues:

- It gives an answer to the question how far the EQF is appropriate as a standard that shall correspond to the requirements of work: to the same extent as it is possible to identify the above mentioned levelling logic
- Making this implicit logic explicit means reducing the opportunities for interest-led assignments of national and sectoral qualifications framework to the EQF– which is one of the main objectives of the project.

Basic developments have already been carried out within Work package 2. Further development of this methodology will benefit from applying it to sectoral and national *frameworks* (WP 3 and WP 4) which should lead to enhanced (i.e. work process related) framework descriptions delivering a

common basis for comparison of similar qualifications/occupational profiles within sectorally oriented cases studies (WP 5)<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Creating Ground for a Future Zone of Mutual Trust

A *zone of mutual trust* of EQF promoters and users will be initiated referring to a collaboration model between public/private stakeholders based on the evaluation of project results achieved in the above mentioned workpackages dealing with the *development and application of referencing methodology*. The aim of work is to supplement already existing referencing criteria and to describe procedures for accrediting referencing processes (Work package 6), to be supported by a dissemination strategy which shall help to overcome the “EQF information divide” between experts and potential end users of the EQF (Work package 7).

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<sup>3</sup> This goes beyond a mere labeling of qualifications by the (necessarily) abstract EQF descriptors which seems to be characteristic for a big part of current approaches relating qualifications to the EQF. It is understood that criteria have to be delivered which help to avoid debates about the relative weight of features identified to be characteristic for certain qualifications; this will end up with (political) agreements on EQF assignment which are arbitrary to a high degree and will not contribute to create “zones of mutual trust” based on transparency for all interested parties.

## Project Outcomes & Results

Main results achieved so far belong to work dealing with the *development of the referencing methodology*. This concerns the *employability grid* for which a first version has been drafted (Deliverable 05 within Work package 2). This first draft of the instrument has been presented for further discussion and reflection at different occasions to experts and stakeholders in the field. Nevertheless it has not been made available yet to a wider public and is only available on request from the project consortium because it is a draft for further exploration and elaboration only. It will be refined and be publicly accessible after it has been piloted by applying it to national qualification frameworks and sectoral approaches in the framework of work packages 3 – 5.

The majority of data for this piloting work in the framework of WP 3 (Referenceability of national qualifications frameworks) and WP 4 (Referenceability of sectoral qualifications frameworks) have been collected already by the project consortium. Initial analysis steps have already been implemented and the consortium has discussed first results in the framework of the 3rd project meeting in February. These results are nevertheless still drafts and are therefore not yet publicly available. They will be published as soon as they are finalised.

Although publication of these project results is not yet provided, project progress is visible and taken into account from outside via the presentations at the Experts' Workshop in Athens and Malta and different other occasions as indicated above.

## Partnerships

The consortium is composed of twelve partners from nine European countries:

- ñ Institut für Technik und Bildung, Universität Bremen (ITB), Germany, Project Promoter, a public research institution
- ñ DEKRA Akademie GmbH (DEKRA), Germany, Project Coordinator, a training provider
- ñ 3s research laboratory (3s), Austria, a private research institution
- ñ Association pour le développement de la Formation (AFT-IFTIM), France; an organisation of the French logistics sector
- ñ Fundación Laboral de Metal (FLM), Spain; a foundation of Spanish trade unions
- ñ UECNCFPA (former ACPART), Romania; an educational body of the Romanian government
- ñ Lux Personal & Kommunikation GmbH (Lux), Germany, a consultancy service in the field of VET
- ñ Centre Régional pour le développement, la formation et l'insertion des jeunes (CREDIJ), France, a spin-off of the ministry of labour
- ñ Politecnico Torino (Politecnico), Italy; a public research institution
- ñ General secretariat for Lifelong Learning (GSLI), Greece; an educational body of the Greek government
- ñ Malta Qualifications Council (MQC), Malta; an educational body of the government of Malta
- ñ Kenniscentrum Handel (KCH), The Netherlands; a public body responsible for VET in the trade sector

It can be seen that the partnership encompasses public bodies as well as private organisations dealing with educational issues in specific sectors. With one exception, all partners have already participated in EQF-oriented projects, most of them in more than one, some of them as co-ordinators. The exception concerns the *General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning in Greece*; this public body is the EQF national contact point and deals ex officio with EQF issues.

This shows that the project consortium is familiar with project issues not only in principle, but has achieved a level of subject-related experience in previous work which should allow partners to start project activities not from scratch, but at a level of discussion which refers to problems to be solved while implementing the EQF as a tool for making descriptions of national qualifications understandable abroad.

Apart from these general skills enabling partners to carry out project work, specific abilities to fulfil the tasks provided in the project can be demonstrated as follows:

*Overall management and quality assurance*

- *WP 1 Project management:* The project will be co-ordinated by *DEKRA Akademie* which has already had this role within three previous EQF-related projects (*Embedding ICT/Multimedia Standardisation Initiatives into Vocational Training Strategies in Europe, European Automotive Sector Competence Meta-Framework – EASCMF, Ways to Sustainability*); currently *DEKRA Akademie* is co-ordinating three EQF-related projects (*VET Stakeholders in the Automotive Sector - VETAS, EQF-adapted educational elements in a predictable framework of change- EQF Predict, and Common Grounds for Referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF – NQF-SQF*)
- *WP 8 Quality assurance:* This workpackage is led by *FLM* which has relevant experience in quality assurance activities.

#### *Development and Application of Methodology*

- *WP 2 Employability grid :* This work package is led by *DEKRA Akademie* which was strongly involved in developing a work process related approach of interpreting EQF descriptors within the project *EASCMF*. *ITB*, also involved in this project, having gathered a lot of experience in describing work processes, contributes to this workpackage as well as the leaders of the other work packages of the group *Development and Application of Methodology*, thereby ensuring that the methodology is properly applied within the WPs led by them.
- *WP 3 Referenceability of national qualification frameworks:* This work package is led by *3s*, co-ordinator of the project *EQF-Ref* which seeks to identify procedures of ‘good practice’ for referencing (national) qualifications levels to the EQF and deals with testing the referencing criteria defined by the EQF Advisory Group. All partners who are responsible for national qualification systems/frameworks or parts of them will participate in this work package: *MQC*, *GSL*, *UECNCFPA*, (responsible for qualifications of higher education in Romania), will in this work package especially consider the framework issues of higher education.
- *WP 4 Referenceability of sectoral qualifications, qualifications/competence frameworks:* This WP is led by *Politecnico di Torino*, responsible for the *CEDEFOP* study, which is currently being carried out, *The relation between sectoral qualifications and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)* and involved in sector-oriented EQF projects, supported by *DEKRA Akademie* and *Kenniscentrum* which are also involved in this study. Further contributors are *AFT-IFTIM*, the most important French training provider in the sector of transport and logistics, *CREDIJ* (experienced with issues of the construction sector), and *FLM* with relevant experience of the metal sector.

- *WP 5 Case studies piloting the application of methodology:* This work package is led by *KCH* which develops and maintains the national qualification structure for existing and new occupations in the trade sector of the Netherlands. Although being a public body, it works in close co-operation with trade companies. Further participants are *DEKRA Akademie* (experienced by co-ordinating the ICT related project *Embedding standards* and member of the CEN/ISSS Workshop on ICT Skills), *AFT-IFTIM*, and *CREDIJ*.

#### *Creating Ground for a Future Zone of Mutual Trust*

- *WP 6 Model of collaboration between sectoral/public stakeholders:* This WP is led by *MQC*, EQF National contact point for Malta. *MQC* is confronted with the challenge of reconciling issues of national and sectoral frameworks in the own country. In this workpackage, all partners will play an active role who are sectoral stakeholders or competent bodies at national level. This is the place where silent partners will help to set up the planned community of public/private stakeholders, based on their already existing commitment in the field, using their experience and their networks: the *Federal Ministry of Education, Art and Culture of Austria* - EQF national contact point, *IG Metall*, *European Metal Workers Federation (EMF-FEM)*, the *Council of European Employers of the Metal, Engineering and Technology-Based Industries (CEEMET)* – involved in work of the EQF Advisory Group
- *WP 7 Overcoming the EQF information divide:* This work package will have two leaders who will closely collaborate: *ITB* with a lot of experience in the field of VET research and involved in various projects dealing with EQF issues at sectoral level will be responsible for the “scientific” part of this work package, *Lux Kommunikation*, having worked for years as a “professional disseminator” and involved in sectoral EQF projects, is therefore responsible for developing and realising a dissemination strategy for a cluster of EQF projects in the automotive sector. They will take over the task of planning and co-ordinating dissemination activities addressed to a broader audience. All project partners will use their networks in order to contribute to work in this work package.

The project consortium can use the involvement of partners in a lot of EQF-related projects for facilitating work to be carried out: Projects can be considered easily accessible resources of preparatory work. The networks of partners, intentionally developing through project activities, will be a *resource of experts* which can be activated at short notice by subcontracting if necessary.

## Plans for the Future

1. The next steps to be taken refer to the activities which have already been started within the work packages that deal with the *development of the referencing methodology*. The currently available version of the *employability grid* has to be tested with regard to its usability as a yardstick of EQF adaptability, and national as well as sectoral frameworks and qualifications will be checked from this perspective. The results of these tests should allow for designing a *final version of the employability grid* usable beyond the limitations of this project.
2. Project results will be exploited for creating a structure of *collaboration between all stakeholders who are relevant for setting up and monitoring qualifications and occupational profiles* at European, national or sectoral level, coming from the public as well as from the private side. These stakeholders shall build a *community* whose structure and composition of this as well as the *system of criteria for recognition of referencing to the EQF* should help to create a *central zone of mutual trust in terms of flexibility and reliability*. For this purpose the following activities shall be carried out:
  - ñ Typologies developed within the project and reports related to them shall be evaluated in order to extend the already available catalogue of referencing criteria in a way that comparability of qualifications and professional profiles can be ensured.
  - ñ A model of *accreditation* of referencing processes based on the overall set of criteria shall be drafted.
  - ñ Methods of monitoring referencing processes shall be established.
  - ñ Procedures of accreditation, criteria for recognition of referencing, organisational structure of the community shall be laid down in an agreement of stakeholders which reflects the specific quality of both kinds of organisations.
  - ñ The role of the future community within a dissemination strategy shall be defined.
3. These activities will be accompanied by further actions intended to overcome the “EQF information divide”.

## Contribution to EU policies

Given the different national traditions and backgrounds of training systems, it cannot be expected that scenarios for the application of the EQF and related instruments can be developed in a single national context and then simply be transferred to other countries. Instead, the performance of the research and development activities outlined in the present proposal requires a collaborative effort of partners from a variety of European countries. The transnational structure of the consortium ensures that experiences and perspectives from diverse backgrounds can be integrated into the debate, and that, in turn, a common understanding can be achieved that facilitates the dissemination of results within the various national contexts.

But, it is not only the involvement of partners embedded in a wide spectrum of networks, working in national environments and related to various areas of stakeholders which delivers the specific contribution of the project to EU policies. The position of these partners in these particular networks is a mere condition for achieving the project objective which explicitly refers to the intention of EU policies:

*Real referenceability* of national and sectoral frameworks to the EQF is a critical issue for the usability of the EQF in the future. If the ambiguity of the EQF cannot be limited, the EQF cannot gain sufficient value to be recognised as translation device between national/sectoral educational systems. Thus the contribution of the project to EU policies has not of a peripheral character: The focus of the project lies exactly in an area where the destiny of some crucial European educational initiatives will be decided.