



Peer Learning Activity

“Comparison of the EQF and third country qualifications frameworks – what have we learned from pilots- how can we take it forward?”

29-30 October 2024, ETF, Turin, Italy

Background note

1. Objectives of the PLA

This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the comparison of the EQF with third country (national and regional) qualifications frameworks is organised by the European Commission, in cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF).

The PLA aims to evaluate the methodology and procedures for comparison, building on the insights gained from the pilot comparisons carried out so far, to ensure that future exercises are well-suited to fostering links between the EQF and qualifications frameworks in relevant third countries or regions, within the broader context of EU external policies including trade and migration.

As the experience shows, many third countries of interest do not meet the requirement of having sufficiently operational national or regional qualifications frameworks. Therefore, one of the objectives of the PLA is to explore how transparency could be achieved with countries that do not (yet) have fully operational qualifications frameworks.

Additionally, the PLA will discuss how to improve the dissemination of information on third country qualifications frameworks and explore more effective ways to document and communicate the results of comparison exercises. The event will also provide an opportunity to learn from the experiences of countries that have conducted bilateral comparisons of their NQFs.

2. Context

Policy context for comparisons

The basis for comparing third country qualifications frameworks with the EQF can be found rooted in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (further referred to as ‘EQF Recommendation of 2017’)¹. Specifically, recommendation 13 calls on the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders within the EQF Advisory Group, to *‘explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable, in accordance with international agreements, the comparison of third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF’*.

¹ 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, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01))

It is important to point out that the relevance of comparison between qualifications frameworks goes far beyond a technical exercise at Commission level. Rather, comparison is an important part of the international dimension of the EQF and has gained relevance in EU external policy. EU and international agreements set a frame for comparison. While some of these directly refer to qualifications, or even qualifications frameworks, others only do so implicitly.

For example, qualifications and skills recognition play an important role in EU Talent Partnerships (part of the Commission's Skills and Talent Mobility Package), which have so far been launched with five countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Talent Partnerships aim to provide frameworks for increased cooperation between the EU, Member States and selected partner countries on talent mobility and skills development. A recurring focus in discussions with partner countries has been on the importance of recognition of skills and qualifications.

Apart from agreements with the EU, international agreements and cooperation processes such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the field of higher education, the Global Convention on Recognition and the Bologna Process also play a role, as all of them apply or refer to instruments, in particular qualifications frameworks, that support comparison and transparency of qualifications.

A study carried out by the ETF in 2021 identified 15 Regional Qualifications (RQF) initiatives in the world in addition to the EQF and QF EHEA.² Furthermore, there are approximately 110 NQF initiatives outside the EQF, offering a large potential of qualifications frameworks that could be the subject of a comparison with the EQF in the future. Yet, many of these qualifications frameworks are still under development and thus are not eligible for a comparison with the EQF under the current modus operandi.

Purpose of comparison

The key purpose of comparison with third country qualifications frameworks is to build trust in the quality and level of qualifications from third country frameworks and support the recognition and international mobility of learners and workers.

More specifically, this comparison can enhance mutual understanding and transparency of qualifications between Europe and these countries, facilitating recognition of third country qualifications within Europe. Additionally, it can promote greater international awareness of the EQF. By fostering such comparisons, the EQF can help strengthen cooperation with countries beyond Europe, particularly in the context of mobility and legal migration, ensuring that the qualifications and skills of potential workers are properly valued in Europe.

Comparison vs. referencing

While the objectives of comparison, in particular with regard to enhancing the transparency and comparability of qualifications, are not fundamentally different from the objectives of EQF referencing, they markedly differ in terms of their policy context, governance and outcomes.

Referencing in the context of the EQF Recommendation means that countries relate (the levels of) their national qualifications frameworks or systems to the (levels of) the EQF in accordance with the ten referencing criteria and procedures stipulated in Annex III of the EQF Recommendation. Referencing takes place on the basis of an EQF referencing report that addresses the ten criteria, supported by a peer review process taking place within the EQF Advisory Group. After completed referencing, countries can indicate EQF levels next to NQF levels on certificates and diplomas and in their qualifications databases. They can also connect their data on qualifications with Europass.

Comparison of qualifications frameworks refers to a dialogue-based process to identify and understand similarities and differences between a third country national or regional qualifications framework and the EQF. This dialogue takes place based on a set of mutually agreed topics and supporting questions

² ETF (2021). Regional Qualifications Framework initiatives around the Globe 2020 – a comparative study.

Drafted by 3s research laboratory – Forschungsverein and the ETF Qualifications Project,

https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-04/rqf_initiatives_around_the_globe_2020_en_april_2021.pdf

to be covered. In contrast to referencing, NQFs and RQFs that have been compared to the EQF will not become part of the EQF.

Project group on the Third Country Dimension of the EQF

Based on the EQF Recommendation of 2017, a project group on the third dimension of the EQF was established in 2019 to develop procedures, criteria and topics for comparison. The project group consists of representatives from countries represented in the EQF Advisory Group, Commission Services, the Council of Europe, Cedefop and ETF.

Prior to the work of the project group and series of pilot comparisons, first experiences were collected in benchmarking exercises with Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. Those were carried out between 2014 and 2016 and provided initial insights into the process and possible outcomes of comparison.

By October 2024, the project group had met 13 times, and the comparison methodology proposed by the group (note EQF AG 55-4, Annex A) has so far been piloted with three qualifications frameworks: the National Qualifications Frameworks of Ukraine and Cabo Verde, and the Regional Qualifications Framework of the Southern African Development Community.

3. Criteria, procedures and topics for comparison

In line with the criteria and procedures set up by the working group, there are currently two criteria to start a comparison: **policy relevance and the stage of development** of the third country qualifications framework. Policy relevance refers to the existence of a mutual benefits that have been clearly identified and recognised by both partners, supported by formal EU or international agreements.

The stage of development (note EQF AG 55-4, Annex C) refers to a qualification framework being sufficiently operational to be ready for comparison. If the regional or third country national qualifications framework is not operational, there is a risk of comparison of a framework that only exists in legal texts and/or policy intents, without tangible impact on transparency and comparability of qualifications and added value for individuals.

A four-step process

The project group agreed on following a four-step process for the comparison. These four steps are preceded by a **phase 0** on initiation, consisting of clarification of the mutual interest and of readiness for comparison. Before comparisons are started, the EQF AG discusses and endorses proposals for comparison.

Phase 1 – Identification

A dialogue begins to agree on the core topics and supporting questions for the comparison. A joint technical working group is established, including on the EQF side at least representatives from two Member States, as well as the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF.

The purpose, scope, and potential risks of the comparison are elaborated. A timetable is established, and the exact topics and questions for comparison are finalised.

Phase 2 – Documentation

Both parties collect the necessary evidence and documentation on the agreed topics and questions.

Phase 3 – Comparison

The technical working group engages in dialogue to understand the similarities and differences between the frameworks. This process may involve stakeholder visits and interviews to gather additional insights. The outcomes are documented, and the team prepares a report outlining the areas of correspondence and divergence between the two frameworks.

Phase 4 – Results of Comparison and Publication

A joint report is produced, summarising the findings of the comparison. The report includes lessons learned, potential next steps, and an action plan for follow-up. The report is published on the EQF/Europass website. Rather than just a technical report, this should be the starting point for wider communication and future dialogue, towards ensuring continued comparability.

Eleven core topics for comparison and dialogue

The process is structured around 11 suggested core topics for comparison and dialogue, which are explored through a series of supporting questions (as stipulated in EQF AG Note 55-4) designed to highlight the similarities and differences between the frameworks. Topics are discussed and jointly agreed with both parties of comparison in phase 1. Suggested topics are summarised in the box below.

1. Objectives of qualifications frameworks

Examining whether the objectives of each qualifications framework support the expected outcomes of comparison. This includes goals such as improving transparency, comparability, and portability of qualifications.

2. Scope of the frameworks

Looking at the scope of each framework, including the types of education and learning it covers (e.g., formal, non-formal, informal, general education, vocational education and training, higher education).

3. Levels and level descriptors

Comparing the number of levels in each framework and how levels are defined using descriptors.

4. Learning outcome approach(es)

Evaluating how each framework defines and uses learning outcomes, including their application to qualifications, assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL).

5. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFI) / Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Comparing approaches for validating learning that occurs outside formal education, and whether qualifications in the NQF can be obtained through such validation processes.

6. Quality assurance

Comparing the quality assurance principles and mechanisms of both frameworks.

7. Communication, visibility, transparency, and access to information

Investigating how well each framework is communicated to stakeholders (e.g., learners, employers, education providers), how accessible information is, and how widely known the frameworks are.

8. Recognition processes

Comparing the processes used to recognise foreign qualifications.

9. Governance Structures

Comparing the governance systems behind each framework, including the responsibilities and legal competencies of the bodies involved, stakeholder engagement, and coordination mechanisms.

10. Referencing/alignment processes

Reviewing how NQFs are aligned or referenced to an RQF, with a focus on criteria used, transparency and quality assurance (topic only applicable for RQFs and for NQFs that are part of an RQF).

11. Transparency and quality assurance of the comparison process

Ensuring that the comparison process itself is transparent and adheres to agreed-upon quality standards.

4. Overview of pilot comparisons carried out so far

National Qualifications Framework of Ukraine & EQF

Work on this comparison exercise started in October 2021. Between October 2021 and May 2022, 15 online meetings were organised (ten joint meetings and five specialised meetings with small groups of experts). On the EU side, three country representatives from the EQF AG were part of the joint technical working group (representatives from PL, HR and LV) as well as representatives from the Commission.

On the Ukrainian side, a broad group of stakeholders participated, including representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Qualifications Agency, the ENIC-NARIC Centre for Recognition, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, as well as representatives from social partners and NGOs and education institutions.

The comparison report was published in February 2023 in English and Ukrainian. The comparison exercise concluded that the two frameworks are broadly comparable and can be linked. Also areas for further development in Ukraine were identified. As Ukraine became an EU candidate country in June 2022 and joined the EQF, after comparison a joint action plan was developed to support the future linking of Ukrainian NQF to the EQF.

National Qualifications Framework of Cabo Verde & EQF

Eight meetings took place between 21st November 2022 and 30 May 2023. In the case of Cabo Verde this group included representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and Enterprise Promotion, Coordination Unit of the National Qualifications System, and the Regulatory Agency of Higher Education (ARES). The EQF was represented by the European Commission, representatives from PT, PL, and LU, the EU Delegation to Cabo Verde, and the ETF.

The final report was published in June 2024 both in English and Portuguese. The comparison showed that both qualifications frameworks share important common features and are broadly comparable. The comparison identified accomplishments and successes, as well as gaps, challenges, and some dilemmas. Both sides highlighted the complementary benefit of the exercise.

Regional Qualifications Framework of Southern African Development Community (SADCQF) & EQF

Work on this comparison exercise, the first with another regional framework, was conducted through a total of seven technical meetings between November 2023 and April 2024. The EQF was represented by the European Commission, EQF AG members from IE, DE, LV and the European Student Union and the ETF. On the SADC side, the group included the SADC Secretariat and ministries and national qualifications authorities of all SADC countries.³

In addition to the 11 comparison topics defined by the project group, additional themes (Bologna process and QF-EHEA, micro-credentials and credit accumulation and transfer systems) were discussed at the request of the comparison working group members.

The comparison exercise concluded that both frameworks are comparable on all topics and differences identified are non-substantial.⁴ The final report of SADC comparison is being finalised and will be published later in autumn 2024, accompanied by a webinar to present the key results of the comparison exercise.

Outcomes of the comparison pilots

In all three pilot cases, the meetings and documents were translated to respective languages to ensure full understanding and transparency and more fruitful discussions. After comparison meetings and finalisation of the reports, open webinars presenting the key outcomes of the comparisons were organised.

³ Angola, Botswana, United Republic of the Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Kingdom of eSwatini, Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

⁴ In line with the UNESCO Global Conventions on recognition of qualifications, the comparison group proposed the following definition of ‘substantial differences’: ‘Substantial differences mean significant differences between the qualifications and the level descriptors of the Frameworks which would most likely prevent the framework from succeeding in alignment and comparability.’

The reports are published on the Europass platform <https://europass.europa.eu/en/node/2036>. They include a comparison table of levels and level descriptors of the two qualifications frameworks in question.

Experience from the three completed comparison exercises has shown that comparisons require proper dialogue between the two qualifications frameworks under comparison in the presence of relevant parties and stakeholders on both ends. With the current procedures, no more than one comparison project per year is feasible. At the same time, information used for the comparisons may quickly become outdated. A key topic for discussion at the PLA is thus how to ensure an effective and result-oriented process, and how EQF Advisory Group members can be best involved to achieve joint ownership.

5. Key questions to be discussed at the PLA

The following key questions will guide the discussions at the PLA:

Looking back at experiences gained thus far

- Are we making enough use of comparison's results?
- We can currently carry out one comparison process per year – what could be done to make the process leaner and more efficient?
- Comparison now requires an operational qualifications framework, but third countries are often in activation stage starting to implement NQFs – how can we support transparency of qualifications in this case?

Improving the process and outcomes of comparison

- How to prepare an effective and result-oriented process and how to conduct the comparison with a lean process? How to engage EQF AG members more?
- Are there better ways to document and communicate the outcomes? What possible tools could we use to disseminate the outcomes?
- How to measure and support the use of the comparison? How to keep the results up to date and continue cooperation with third countries?

Way forward: suggestions for a roadmap for future comparisons

- What actions are needed for future comparisons for 2025-2029, and what are the implications for recognition and the work of the new Commission?

The findings of the PLA will be further discussed in the project group on the third country dimension of the EQF and the 66th EQF Advisory Group meeting (26-27 November). Based on the outcomes of this PLA, the procedures and criteria for comparison will be updated.