

EQF celebrates 10 years and looks to the future

To mark 10 years of the European Qualifications Framework, or EQF, the European Commission organised a 300-expert conference in Brussels, on 15 and 16 March. Participants came from across the EU, its Neighbourhood, including ETF partner countries, Australasia, Asia, Africa and the Pacific, a reflection of the worldwide interest the EU instrument has attracted in its first decade.

Intended to make qualifications easier to understand, to foster lifelong learning and to support transnational mobility, the EQF has made great progress in achieving these goals. This event looked back at these achievements and celebrated but also took a reality check at where it has made less impact. It also looked to the future, asking how the EQF will need to adapt to new forms of qualifications, and so continue to be useful in our constantly-changing world.

It is fair to say the EQF's learning outcomes basis has influenced wider education and training reform, being embedded across EU policies in learning and teaching policies, in quality assurance and so on, in all forms and levels of education and training. Outcomes approaches are increasingly implemented by the EU countries themselves. Validation of non-formal learning, whereby what matters and what is recognised is the individual's skills, not how or where they were obtained, is now mainstream in the Union.

Notwithstanding these successes, the EQF still needs to be implemented more consistently within countries, where most citizens and employers have still to encounter the framework, even though they are the beneficiaries. Pathway-building between vocational and higher education is still slow going in most countries.

A big success has been the instrument's influence beyond the EU and EEA countries, indeed it is now a global model and reference point, with which countries the world over seek a relationship. In the Neighbourhood, among ETF's partner countries, 25 of 29 are developing NQFs, to reform their vocational education and training systems and to produce better qualifications.

But we know the globe keeps turning. One key issue the EU, including ETF, needs to pay attention to is what is becoming increasingly known as digital credentials, which acknowledge learning. These badges, certificates, micro-credentials and so on exist in various forms, and experts debate if they are "real" qualifications. They share some characteristics, their small size, they are pursued predominantly or exclusively digitally. So most of these outputs are unregulated or often unknown.

One question at the conference's panel session was how NQFs, and so the EQF, respond. The EQF was re-modelled under a revised Recommendation in 2017, 9 years after its initial adoption. To remain useful, we will likely need to update it again quicker than that.