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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

of the

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

{SWD(2024) 141 final}

Introduction

The European Qualifications Framework (“EQF”) is an EU transparency tool for qualifications set up in 2008 and later revised in 2017. It serves as a “translation device”. It allows qualifications from one country at a specific level to be compared with qualifications from another country by looking at their relation to common EQF levels.

The implementation of the EQF is governed by the EQF Advisory Group (“AG”), consisting of the Commission, Cedefop, ETF, Council of Europe, national representatives and stakeholders. EQF National Coordination Points (“NCPs”) support national authorities and inform stakeholders about the EQF.

The EQF aims to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications and to facilitate lifelong learning. It aims to contribute to the modernisation of education and training systems and increase in employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners.

The evaluation assessed the 2017 EQF Recommendation from 1 June 2017 to 1 June 2022 in the 38 EQF countries - 27 Member States, the United Kingdom until 1 February 2020, four EFTA countries, five candidate and two potential candidate countries.

Key findings

The 2017 EQF Recommendation has strengthened the EQF and given a new boost to its implementation. The EQF is a well-established reference point that is widely accepted among institutions working with qualifications. Substantial implementation progress was observed since 2017 in relation to the referencing of NQFs to the EQF (only ES, BE(de), BiH were unreferenced), the consistent and extended use of learning outcomes and the provision of information about EQF levels of individual qualifications¹. A procedure was established to compare the EQF to third country frameworks.

The progress achieved corresponds to what was expected, even if further efforts are needed in some areas. 16 NQFs still do not include qualifications awarded outside the formal domain (e.g. learning at work or during leisure time). The level of awareness of the EQF among the wider public is still limited.

The EQF contributes substantially to increased transparency of qualifications, especially from the formal domain. Stakeholders from different groups found that the EQF sparked national discussions, cooperation between involved actors, and increased understanding of other qualifications systems.

Progress, albeit more limited, is observed in relation to qualifications outside the formal domain. Consulted citizens, local and national authorities are three times more likely to expect a qualification from the formal domain to be recognised in another country, compared to qualification awarded outside the formal system.

¹ EQF levels indicated on qualifications in 35 EQF countries, in registers and databases in 28 EQF countries, linking national databases to the European level by 21 EQF countries)

The EQF indirectly facilitates lifelong learning, with more to be achieved. The EQF sparked NQFs revisions, which in turn were linked to national lifelong learning policies, but mainly in countries with less mature NQFs.

The EQF contributes to national debates on modernising education and training, with a focus on the NQFs. National stakeholders agree that the EQF approach supported and inspired reforms of qualification systems of different maturities, linked to the use of learning outcomes in all education sectors and new types of qualifications.

The EQF 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 the wider public (see above).

The EQF is perceived as an international benchmark, and source of inspiration for the development of regional and national qualifications frameworks in third countries. In this way, the EQF has increasingly contributed to a common language for qualification frameworks globally.

The EQF contributes to a better understanding and fairer recognition of non-EQF third country qualifications to some extent, with considerable potential. ENIC-NARIC centres rely on the EQF in recognition to some extent, but national stakeholders could not identify a role of the EQF in recognition procedures - because of established national procedures.

The implementation of the EQF is efficient to a large extent, including its governance structure and expertise provided by Cedefop and the ETF. The benefits outweigh its limited costs, based on stakeholder views. EU and national implementation costs are outweighed by the increased understanding of qualification systems across Europe, trust through working together, and cooperation in the field of qualifications.

EU grants for the EQF implementation at national level are deemed adequate. The costs incurred by countries for EQF implementation are eligible under an EU grant for EQF NCPs, co-financed through the Erasmus+ programme. The grants are deemed as adequate by 36 out of 42 NCPs and EQF AG members. Activities, related to the day-to-day operations of the NQF are usually funded by national budgets.

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.

The EQF also serves as a backbone of national and EU policies and instruments for transparency of skills and qualifications. The EQF 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. The EQF play also a key role in the Europass framework: Europass tools shall refer to the EQF in information on qualifications and descriptions of national education and training systems. The Europass platform also serves as platform for the EQF.

The positive effects of the EQF are largely due to the EU intervention, 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 it. 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.

The relevance of the EQF and its objective to increase the transparency of qualifications has been clearly demonstrated, with even more focus placed on the transparency of skills and third country qualifications. Transparent qualifications and skills are key for the smooth functioning of the European labour market, able to respond to the skills demands of the green and digital transitions. Responding to new skills demands in the context of an aging workforce and labour shortages also 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.

While the 2017 EQF Recommendation provides sufficient flexibility to respond to shifting needs, stakeholders pointed at limited guidance to fully respond to new needs in practice: inclusion of micro-credentials into qualifications frameworks; opening up of NQFs to qualifications acquired in non-formal and informal settings; levelling of international qualifications.

Lessons learned

The EQF approach is well equipped to support transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications within and between countries. It would be necessary to maintain the existing structures and processes. Efforts are needed by Member States to ensure referencing reports are up-to-date and databases and registers of qualifications and learning opportunities are linked to the Europass platform; by the Commission to provide guidance on changes in the qualifications landscape; and by all to continue the use of learning outcomes.

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 needed for the integration in NQFs of qualifications other than full formal education and training qualifications.

The EQF has clear and well-established links with other transparency tools and has become an integral part of other EU policies and tools. Maintaining and further strengthening these existing synergies (with a “skills first approach” or strategies to attract talent) could contribute to an even more comprehensive approach to skills and qualifications in Europe, increased in relevance in the current context of labour shortages and shifting skills demands, as highlighted in the European Year of Skills.

The EQF has clear practical value for stakeholders working with qualifications, but its relevance and further potential purpose is still not sufficiently clear to the broader public. There is a need to bring the EQF closer to workers, employers, students. It could be explored how accessibility of information on the EQF, the NQFs and the qualifications therein, can be improved, with the help of digitalisation. The use of the EQF and NQFs to support the recognition of qualifications could also be further promoted.