



Thessaloniki/Brussels, 18 September 2013

**Joint meeting of the EQF Advisory Group and the Structural Reforms Working Group, 25 September 2013, Brussels
and
EQF Advisory Group, 26-27 September 2013, Brussels**

Note AG21-6

Information on the Cedefop study on ‘Qualifications at level 5 of the EQF’

Cedefop’s study on ‘Qualifications at level 5 of the EQF’¹ is now finalised. The results are currently being prepared for publication. It will be made public by the end of this year. To keep the EQF AG informed, the main findings of the study are summarised below.

EQF level 5 qualifications – at the crossroads between general education, VET, and HE – play an important role in providing access to employment and career advancement, as well as enabling further learning and progression to higher education, making them appealing to both students and employers.

This is one of the key conclusions of the Cedefop study which explored the key functions and purposes of EQF level 5 qualifications in 15 countries and how the learning outcomes and ‘best fit’ approaches have been applied for assigning qualifications to the EQF level 5 across countries. The analysis is based on fifteen country studies² and six in-depth case studies on specific qualifications.³

The findings of the study show that there is diversity in the way in which the qualifications level(s) linked to EQF level 5 is (are) ‘filled’ in the 15 countries in question. One country (Lithuania) does not currently have any qualifications linked to EQF level 5. Two countries (the Czech Republic and Estonia) only link qualifications from outside formal education and training to EQF level 5. Several countries, such as Belgium-Flanders, the Netherlands, and Latvia link only HE qualifications to EQF level 5, while Austria link only VET qualifications. In Portugal, the ‘technological specialisation diploma’ is registered as a VET qualification at level 5, but the courses

¹ The research was carried out by Panteia in consortium with 3S under the contract AO/ECVL/JP-SPEV/Qualifications_EQF_level_5/001/12

² The 15 countries selected were those that had completed referencing their national qualification levels to the EQF by June 2012: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales).

³ The case studies have been conducted in Austria, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Lithuania and the Netherlands.

that lead to the award of this qualification are run by both HE and non-HE institutions. A number of countries such as Denmark, Luxembourg, and Croatia link VET and HE qualifications to EQF level 5. Finally, some countries have a diversified qualification landscape linked to EQF level 5, such as those that can be found in France, Ireland, Malta and the United Kingdom (including for instance sectoral, private and/or general education qualifications).

There is also great divergence among countries with regard to the importance placed on EQF level 5 qualification types, as expressed in quantitative terms (number of programmes available, students enrolled in programmes and number of holders of level 5 qualifications). In some cases numbers also vary extensively in relation to different types of level 5 qualifications in a country. In addition, there is an even larger diversity in the availability of data concerning these qualifications and programmes. A lack of comparative data across countries makes a comparative assessment difficult. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to cluster countries based on the quantitative data available (number of students enrolled and/or qualifications awarded) and an overall qualitative assessment. Four clusters of countries were identified. These clusters range from countries in which EQF level 5 qualifications play an important role in terms of students enrolled or qualifications awarded – such as France and Austria – to countries in which EQF level 5 qualifications currently play a more modest role – such as the Netherlands, Croatia, or the Czech Republic. It appears that EQF level 5 qualifications are gaining importance as the study identified several potential qualifications which (for various reasons) are yet to be linked to the equivalent NQF levels, for instance qualifications acquired in CVET in Lithuania, qualifications acquired in non-formal learning contexts in the Netherlands, or private qualifications/professional awards in the United Kingdom.

In those countries in which EQF level 5 qualifications have existed for a long time, such as in France, these qualifications are more widely accepted by employers than in countries in which they have been developed more recently.

EQF level 5 qualifications offer various access and progression routes – depending on the type and purpose of a qualification – from and to employment and to higher education. On the one hand, level 5 qualifications primarily provide access to and advancement in the labour market. Among the thirty identified qualification types, thirteen are primarily oriented towards the labour market; nine qualification types possess a ‘double’ function, valued as entry qualifications for both the labour market and higher education (in some cases with the possibility for credit transfer); and eight qualification types provide clearly articulated entry opportunities into bachelor programmes.

Many EQF level 5 qualifications are designed to up-skill individuals already in employment and provide them with advanced technical and/or management skills, as is the case in the Netherlands (an example is the Dutch ‘associate degree management and health care’). Almost all students enrolled in this type of programme are already employed and are seeking to upgrade their management competences to enable them to perform team leader roles in the organisations in which they work. Due to the fact that it allows for many areas of specialisation, the French ‘university diploma of technology’ is highly valued by employers and holders of the diploma have far more favourable employment prospects, especially in small and medium-size enterprises.

EQF level 5 qualifications can be obtained in current or related occupations through the validation of work-based learning, as is the case in Estonia or the Czech Republic. Validation of non-formal and informal learning plays an important role at this level in many countries, enabling qualification acquisition through validation, or the possibility of

reducing the duration of a programme that lead to the award of a qualification. In France, in 2010, 66% of all beneficiaries obtaining full validation in higher education with immediate certification were at EQF level 5 (predominantly related to the 'higher technician certificate' (BTS)).

Level 5 qualifications can help progress to higher education, but this purpose is significantly less emphasised than the acquisition of skills for the labour market. Many EQF level 5 qualifications are short-cycle higher education qualifications, which in the Bologna Process were dedicated to provide an intermediate step towards bachelor degrees. The study, however, shows that they are broadly considered as independent qualifications with distinct profiles and labour market relevance.

In general, when an EQF level 5 qualification type is part of or closely related to a bachelor's degree programme, progression (including credit transfer) is guaranteed. This is the case, for example in the Netherlands, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. In cases where an EQF level 5 qualification is a CVET qualification and primarily oriented towards the labour market (for example, in the Czech Republic or Estonia), progression to higher education is not an explicit goal of the qualification. The situation is different in Austria: the VET college qualification – neither a short-cycle higher education nor preliminary targeted towards the labour market – is a 'double qualification' granting access to both higher education and the labour market. Approximately 50% of VET college graduates pursue further study at a higher level.

The background of learners enrolled in programmes leading to an EQF 5 qualification can be described as heterogeneous with regard to education, age, and/or work experience. It must be noted that in many countries quantitative data on the background of students is unavailable. However, indicative data shows that EQF level 5 qualifications are especially attractive to students with a vocational education and training background, and those already in employment. In some countries individuals who enrol in programmes that lead to a level 5 qualification already have obtained some kind of higher education degree (for example, in supplementary courses (for adult) learners at SCHE in Denmark).

The learning outcomes are very differently described for the specific qualifications studied. First of all, there is a difference in their scope; they are either used to describe full qualifications and/or separate units/modules of qualifications. Secondly, the terminology used differs across qualifications and countries. Some of the qualifications include categories comparable with EQF descriptors (knowledge, skills and competence) through the use of NQF descriptors (which sometimes also need to reflect Dublin Descriptors), but there is a variety of learning outcomes categories used other than the concepts expressed in the level descriptors of the NQFs. According to the evidence found, in most cases, the detailed descriptions in terms of learning outcomes are explicitly developed on the basis of a professional /occupational profile which is agreed upon with labour market stakeholders and are therefore, often related to or expressed in competences.

Countries are either assigning individual qualifications to NQF levels (as is for example the case in Belgium Flanders or the Czech Republic) or types of qualifications (as for instance in Luxembourg or the Netherlands). The latter approach is usually taken in the initial phase of the NQF and newly developed or revised qualifications will be assigned to levels on an individual basis.

The level of qualifications is either identified via a linguistic matching of the qualifications' and the level descriptors (e.g. Denmark, Estonia or Luxembourg) or (also) by taking into account how qualifications are currently regarded in the society (e.g. Austria). Sometimes other criteria are (additionally) used, such as duration of a

programme or the workload associated with it, for classifying qualifications in the NQF (e.g. Denmark, Malta, the Netherlands).

A main challenge for applying the learning outcomes approach for classifying qualifications is the fact that qualifications are only described to a certain degree in terms of learning outcomes (e.g. in Austria or Portugal). In some countries qualification descriptions are required to 'reflect' the NQF level descriptors (e.g. in UK) whereas in other countries the exact same categories structuring NQF level descriptors have to be used for describing qualifications (e.g. in Ireland).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS