Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems

Final Report

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July 2016

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Abstract

This study examined the characteristics of international sectoral qualifications, frameworks and standards and analysed potential options for linking them to the EQF. It drew on desk research, a survey of international sectoral/professional organisations, interviews with representatives of organisations responsible for selected initiatives, a survey of EQF NCPs and an expert workshop.

The study found that international sectoral initiatives were a widespread phenomenon. There were 254 identified organisations delivering these initiatives, of which several managed more than one. Most were qualifications, suites of qualifications, or standards.

The initiatives examined in-depth cover a range of sectors and are most commonly targeted at high-skilled professionals. Most have a high number of users and been established for over a decade. Nearly all are described using learning outcomes and subject to quality assurance processes, although the latter varies considerably by organisation. Over half referred to EQF levels, of which two-thirds are directly or indirectly linked to an NQF.

There was demand from initiative owners for a process to directly link initiatives to the EQF. This was considered less burdensome than linking through NQFs and would ensure more consistent levelling decisions. Moreover, it reduced the risk of organisations linking qualifications to the EQF without formal validation.

Executive summary

The study was commissioned to support the European Commission to reflect on the potential role of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in supporting recognition of International Sectoral Qualifications and related initiatives. This document has been prepared for the European Commission; however, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Background and context

The EQF is a common European reference framework. It acts as a translation device to make qualifications acquired within the different education and training systems in Europe more readable and understandable.

A key objective of the EQF is to integrate International Sectoral Qualifications, frameworks and systems. The 2008 Recommendation on the establishment of the EQF states that '*The European Qualifications Framework should, moreover, enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to a common European reference point and thus show the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems'.*

There has however been little concrete action taken so far to clarify the role of EQF in supporting International Sectoral Qualifications. The study was designed to shed light on the nature of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives, their ambition to link with the EQF and the possibilities for establishing such linkages.

Study aims and methodology

The study has two main purposes:

- To carry out a mapping of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives, in terms of type, maturity, governance, use of learning outcomes and quality assurance systems, and their relationship with NQFs and the EQF.

- To identify and analyse options for potential linkages with the EQF.

The scope of this assignment was broader than international sectoral qualifications frameworks. The study looked at a broad range of types of initiatives, not just those governed by official sectoral bodies. The study also examined both sectoral initiatives and those that focused on particular professions. All these initiatives had to be used in several countries.

The methodology for this study combined desk research, an online survey of international sectoral and professional organisations, interviews with 74 organisations in charge of selected initiatives, a rapid survey of EQF NCPs and an expert workshop.

Study findings

Main types of initiatives and how common they are

Initiatives in the field of international sectoral qualifications are a relatively wide-spread phenomenon. The research identified 254 organisations that managed international sectoral qualifications, frameworks or standards. Several of these organisations manage more than one such initiative. Further, it is also expected that there are several private initiatives that were not identified in the research, which means the overall number of initiatives could be higher.

Most initiatives identified by this study are international sectoral qualifications, suites of qualifications, or standards. The study did not identify any initiatives that would meet the definition of an international sectoral qualifications system and so concluded that it is not appropriate to use the expression qualifications system in this context.

Most initiatives concern a relatively small number of qualifications which cannot be considered a qualifications system as per the definition used by Cedefop[1].

International sectoral initiatives exist in a large number of economic sectors. The study found initiatives that related to 17 sectors. The most common activities were related to human health and social services, followed by arts, entertainment and recreation, business administration, ICT and finance, insurance and real estate.

A large majority of identified organisations provide initiatives targeting highly skilled professionals. Most initiatives were top-up qualifications or qualifications that were mainly designed for people who already hold an initial qualification.

Most organisations reported that their initiatives had labour market value but were not a formal entry requirement for an occupation/ profession. The most common purpose for initiatives was to facilitate the movement of professionals across countries and securing and or raising professional standards.

Maturity of initiatives identified

Most of the initiatives analysed involve relatively high numbers of people and many have been in place for over a decade. At the same time a number of initiatives analysed were still in early stages of their development – this is particularly the case for the international sectoral qualifications frameworks.

Around two thirds of initiatives reviewed in depth had over 5,000 'users' (individuals that have qualifications or certificates based on international sectoral qualifications, standards or frameworks). Only 11 initiatives reviewed in depth had less than 1,000 users. This shows that there is significant take-up of international sectoral initiatives.

The majority (42 out of 74) of the initiatives examined in the qualitative interviews operate worldwide and do not focus specifically on the European market. The remainder are mostly active in Europe and about one third of those in all or almost all European countries.

Most initiatives are generally well-established. Over half of organisations reported that their initiatives have been established for over 10 years. However, a relatively high proportion (12 of 74) were developed in the last two years.

There are indications that recent developments of EU tools, and policies aiming to foster transnational cooperation in education and training, have been a spur in encouraging sector organisations to develop international sectoral initiatives. Interviewed organisations reported that growing interest in using the EQF and its underlying principles as a reference for designing the initiatives. There is less evidence that the growing development of international sectoral initiatives that are often not part of a formal education and training system is fostered by NQF developments.

Management and governance

Many initiatives analysed are led by organisations representing either national professional bodies or directly representing the professionals themselves. Only a small number were governed by private for-profit companies, however, this is also due to the fact that such initiatives were only identified for this research in an ad-hoc (not systematic) manner. Most of the initiatives identified had in place processes for ensuring the continued relevance of the initiative (mostly in the case of qualifications).

The vast majority of initiatives are managed by organisations that are membership based. Organisations with individual professionals as members had over 1,000 members. In organisations where members were organisations, the number of members varied significantly. In total, 17 organisations had 20-50 members, while a further 13 reported having between 100 and 1000 members.

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[1] Cedefop (2014) *Terminology of European education and training policy*

Organisations employed a range of approaches for managing initiatives. However, the most common set-up in more formalised arrangements is a specialised group which meets regularly to discuss developments and ensure relevance. This group may be a committee, a group of experts, or an advisory board, often comprised of sector experts and/or educational experts.

Processes for updating initiatives to ensure the initiatives' relevance range from unstructured to highly structured arrangements: some organisations hold regular annual or bi-annual meetings while others hold meetings on ad-hoc basis in order to discuss updates and trends of their sectors. In a few initiatives, internal teams are set up in order to develop principles and proposals for revision which are then directly put into practice, but most initiatives also include a variety of internal and external stakeholders, in order to gather extensive feedback from the sector.

Some initiatives, mainly those developed in the course of EU funded projects, do not (yet) have a system in place for updating the initiative. Updating is only done informally by the former project partners, in the best case through a follow-up project, or in the worst case, not at all.

The most common funding source for international sectoral initiatives are assessment or certification fees, followed by membership fees. Another common type of financing is licensing or accreditation fees and charging course tuition fees.

Over a third of organisations indicated that they received EU funding at least at once during the initiative's development, with Leonardo da Vinci or LLP grants being the most common EU project funding in this sample.

Relationship with NQFs and EQF

Nine countries currently have a national procedure in place (or under development) for including international sectoral qualifications in their National Qualifications Frameworks. These are BG, BIH[2], FR, LT[3], NL, PT, SI, SK, UK-EWNI, UK-SC. This has not changed significantly since 2015. There are 22 countries that do not have national procedure in place or under development for the inclusion of ISQs. The following factors were mentioned as potential contributors to making the inclusion of ISQ an issue at national level: discussion on the inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NQF; increased pressure/interest on the part of providers; respective developments at EU-level; experience from other countries; a more cohesive approach at European level to the assessment of ISQs.

A total of 26 organisations (from the 74 interviewed) have reported to have linked their initiatives to an NQF. Two types of linkage were identified: a direct link to NQFs (reported by 14 initiatives); and an indirect link (also reported by 14 initiatives), where qualifications based on international sectoral standards/frameworks or that integrate international sectoral qualifications are included in NQFs in some countries.

The main reason why organisations chose to link their initiatives to NQFs was to improve national recognition. In particular, organisations believed it would improve perceptions of equivalency with national qualifications, improve progression opportunities for users and provide access to public funding.

A few organisations that did not wish to link to NQFs believed inclusion in an NQF might require changes in the ISQ and the standard for training and assessment, which could deteriorate its quality. Furthermore, a few organisations believed that inclusion in an NQF does not benefit the European or international dimension of the initiative and might therefore even be counterproductive.

Several organisations reported negative experiences of linking their initiatives to NQFs. The procedures are perceived as time consuming and burdensome and the

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[2] BIH stated that is was under development.
[3] LT stated that it was under development.

process of negotiation with national authorities on the inclusion of ISQs into NQFs is also considered as rather slow. NQF authorities in different countries (EU Member States as well as third countries) have different regulations and criteria for including qualifications into their NQF.

The majority of interviewees has shown a good level of understanding of the EQF. Deeper knowledge was shown by interviewees from organisations targeting mostly the European market. However, the level of awareness identified in the study is likely to be artificially high as organisations are more likely to respond to the survey if they were aware of the EQF.

Interviewees were asked (and this was verified through desk research) whether initiatives analysed were already referring to EQF levels. Thirty-nine organisations (responsible for 39 initiatives) displayed EQF levels. In 13 cases such a link is being displayed without any existing linkage with an NQF.

The most commonly mentioned reason for having or wanting to create a link with the EQF is to improve recognition. About half of the organisations interviewed referred to various aspects of recognition, including recognition of professions; recognition at European Level; recognition outside Europe; recognition in the labour market; and recognition in education and training systems.

Some interviewees have not yet taken steps to link their initiative to the EQF. They stated that they may wish to do so in future. A few did not consider the EQF as well known or mature enough to provide significant benefits. However, as the EQF becomes better known and used, linkage to the EQF will become increasingly relevant.

Use of learning outcomes and quality assurance

The research found that learning outcomes were commonly used to define international sectoral qualifications and standards. Nearly all interviewed organisations reported using learning outcomes and some provided examples of the learning outcomes they use. The use of learning outcomes was common among all types of organisations.

Around half of organisations managing frameworks reported using learning outcomes to define the levels of frameworks. In these frameworks, each level indicated the level of autonomy in which individuals could conduct a task. For example, in level 1 individuals are able to assist with work, in level 2 they able to work with little supervision, and in level 3 they can conduct tasks without any direction.

In total, 64 of the 74 interviewed organisations stated they had explicit quality assurance processes in place. These cover the development of initiatives, the delivery of training and the assessment/certification process.

Most organisations had some quality assurance procedures in place for ensuring the quality of training delivery. Overall, 43 of the 74 interviewed organisations stated they had an approved provider process that training providers must meet to deliver the initiative. This included nearly all of the organisations that did not deliver the training themselves. Other common quality assurance procedures included: reviewing training materials (reported by 30 organisations); requiring teachers or examiners to meet certain criteria (25 organisations) or conducting a provider audit (reported by 11 organisations).

Nearly all organisations stated they had clear assessment and certification criteria, of which four-fifths were based on learning outcomes. In around half of initiatives, organisations also specified the length of the examination and the nature of the examination (whether coursework or exam based).

Implications for the EQFs

The study examined potential options for linking the international sectoral qualifications and frameworks to the EQF. These options are discussed below.

Status quo/enhanced status quo

- **Option 1A** – Organisations making a direct link to the EQF themselves
- **Option 1A** + - Self-declared linkage based on a common set of criteria but no verification process
- **Option 1B** – initiatives link to the EQF through NQFs

In the status quo, organisations can either directly link to the EQF informally or link through NQFs. Neither of these options are ideal. Informal linkage to the EQF means there is no validation process for decisions. This ultimately means there is no control over whether these initiatives meet EQF principles of learning outcomes and quality assurance. This could ultimately affect trust in the EQF, which could in turn mean it is less effective as a mobility tool.

In addition, linking initiatives through NQFs is only available in a few countries, and consequently organisations have limited choice in the NQFs they choose to link to. In some cases, organisations will be required to translate their initiative documents. There are also examples of initiatives linked to multiple EQF levels through inclusion in different NQFs which will harm trust in the initiative.

Through interviews most organisations reported that NQF inclusion procedures are very tedious and ineffective because countries are at different development stages of their NQF. Where qualifications were developed as EU-wide initiatives (rather than qualifications originally used in some countries but them applied internationally) there is a strong desire to improve processes for linking to NQFs, or for there to be an approach for directly linking qualifications to the EQF.

Strengthening indirect linkage to EQF

- **Option 2A:** Creating an agreement on requirements for ISQs to be included into a NQF
- **Option 2B**: Improve transparency on the national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF

Strengthening indirect linkage to the EQF should improve the process of referencing international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications to NQFs, so that in turn these would give coherent access to linkages with the EQF. Increasing linkage to NQFs would also help improve the recognition of initiatives in national markets.

These benefits of this option are only likely to be realised if a large number of countries have processes for linking initiatives to their NQFs. However, it is also likely to have significant resource implications on some national competent authorities. Some may have to change or introduce new processes, and/or change legislation. As a consequence, there may be little appetite among national competent authorities to change their current system. Moreover, if the changes were introduced, they would likely be realised over a three to five year horizon, as a minimum.

Developing a process for directly linkage

- **Option 3A:** Direct linkage of ISQF to the EQF
- **Option 3B:** Direct linkage of ISQ to the EQF

Option 3B is more beneficial than Option 3A as it covers a wider range of initiatives. As identified in the research, there are relatively few ISQF and the majority of initiatives are individuals or suites of qualifications.

This option was the preferred option for most organisations that participated in the workshop. It is seen as the easiest method of linkage and less time-consuming and burdensome than to go through the NQFs. It is also expected that the value of ISQs would be strengthened and they would be better recognised at national level once they had a formal relationship to the EQF. Linkage to the EQF would then enable faster and less complicated inclusion in NQFs.

This option may be difficult to implement as it requires the buy-in from national authorities and the European Commission. It is understood that some national authorities have reservations on recognising qualifications outside of formal education, which could make it difficult to gain this buy-in. However, there are national authorities in nine countries that do recognise ISQs, which provides a solid base to build on.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study shows that international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications are a reality that cannot be neglected as in some cases they concern high numbers of people. Most are also described in learning outcomes and pay attention to issues of renewal of qualifications/initiatives and their quality assurance. In fact, as most of these initiatives receive no or very little public funding, the pressure to ensure that they are relevant and of quality is high as it is a precondition for attracting learners and getting recognition by employers.

The study also shows that there is awareness of the EQF among these organisations and willingness to establish a link with EQF levels. This is not the case for all initiatives but for a majority of those examined in depth

The study identified several options through which the status quo could be moved forward. None of them is ideal when looking at the combination of benefits versus costs and feasibility, particularly in terms of likely political resistance. However, they do outline actions which are likely to improve recognition of initiatives at a European and national level.

The recommendations of the study are:

- **Recommendation 1**: Examine in greater depth the feasibility of creating a direct link between EQF and international sectoral qualifications. There is strong demand from international sectoral organisations to establish a direct linkage with the EQF. This would have implications for the EQF referencing process. However, a comparable set of criteria as the one for referencing national qualifications frameworks/systems to the EQF could be adapted to international sectoral initiatives.

- **Recommendation 2:** The feasibility assessment should examine in depth:

  - The position of Member States (as this aspect was not covered by this assignment) and in particular the type of objections put forward by the national authorities and reflecting on how these could be catered for;

  - The eligibility criteria of initiatives. There would be merit in only opening up this possibility to initiatives that are sufficiently mature and reach out to a significant number of people**.**

- **Recommendation 3:** In case it proves unfeasible to create a procedure for an official direct linkage with EQF, consider the possibility of giving organisations guidance on how to improve the quality of self-declared linkages. As shown by this study, a number of organisations are already referring to EQF levels without having made an official link. It is unlikely that this practice will stop – on contrary it is likely to spread as the EQF becomes more and more established. If that tendency continues there would be added value at minimum in giving clear guidance on how such linkages should be established.

- **Recommendation 4:** Alongside efforts to create a direct link between EQF and international sectoral qualifications, the European Commission and EQF Advisory Group should also provide common guidance to national authorities for including international sectoral qualifications in NQFs. There will continue to be demand by owners of international sectoral qualifications to link their qualifications to NQFs, as it can provide access to funding and improves the national recognition of qualifications. This process should be largely similar to

the processes that national authorities adopt to link national qualifications developed outside formal education and training. These qualifications share many of the same characteristics of international sectoral qualifications, in terms of relevance, use of learning outcomes, quality assurance, etc.

1   Introduction

This study was commissioned in the context of European Commission's reflection on the potential role of the European Qualifications Framework in supporting recognition of International Sectoral Qualifications and related initiatives.

This document has been prepared for the European Commission; however, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Box 1 - Terminology

The report uses the word 'initiative' to refer to all types of schemes covered by the study.

Section 2.1 presents in further detail the different types of initiatives analysed which were:

- International sectoral qualifications (single);

- Suites of international sectoral qualifications;

- International sectoral qualifications standards;

- International sectoral qualifications frameworks;

- International sectoral competence frameworks; and

- International sectoral qualifications systems however, as explained in section 2.1, this term was eventually dropped from the analysis.

1.1   Background to the study

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common European reference framework, also referred to as a meta framework. It acts as a translation device to make qualifications acquired within the different education and training systems in Europe more readable and understandable. Member States have been invited to relate their national qualifications levels to the EQF. The 2008 Recommendation on the establishment of the EQF states that '*The European Qualifications Framework should, moreover, enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to a common European reference point and thus show the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems.*'[4]

While the EQF Recommendation provides a definition of an 'international sectoral organisation'[5], it does not include a specific definition of an '*international sectoral qualification*' (ISQ), nor of an international sectoral qualifications system/framework. Also, the EQF Recommendation does not elaborate on *how* such relationship shall be established.

In the period March 2014- May 2015, the EQF Advisory Group[6] set up a subgroup on International Sectoral Qualifications. In particular, the sub-group was put in place to develop a common definition of the term 'International Sectoral Qualification' and to

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[4] Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32008H0506%2801%29

[5] 'International sectoral organisation' means an association of national organisations, including, for example, employers and professional bodies, which represents the interests of national sectors.

[6] The EQF Advisory Group is the main governance body overseeing the implementation of the EQF. It is composed of EU MS representatives as well as representatives of EU social partners and other relevant stakeholders.

explore existing or planned procedures for the linking of ISQ to National Qualifications Frameworks.[7]

The subgroup defined as 'International Sectoral Qualification' ... 'certificate, diploma, degree or title awarded by an international body (or a national body accredited by an international body) and used in more than one country, which includes learning outcomes (based on standards developed by an international sectoral organisation or an international company) relevant to a sector of economic activity.'[8]

The 2012 Cedefop report on international qualifications refers to an increasing number of qualifications, which are awarded at international level, outside the jurisdiction of national authorities. The report also calls them 'non-State' qualifications. These may be developed and are awarded by a wide range of bodies, organisations and companies addressing various purposes. Although this report does not specifically refer to international *sectoral* qualifications it can be assumed that they are related to sectors because the awarding bodies mentioned in the report are often international sectoral organisations and often 'sectoral needs' are mentioned in reference to the purpose of these qualifications.

These international qualifications are, for example, "developed by global companies (for commercial advantage), sectoral and professional bodies (for regulatory power and market position), and international authorities (for the safe and efficient operation of systems such as transport, health and communications)"[9]. According to the Cedefop report, these qualifications are in many contexts considered as important elements within the education and training environment, often with strong links to employment.

The 2012 Cedefop report further characterises international qualifications by their extreme variety and the fact that they are not restricted to a particular national system or territory. They are all qualifications whose exchange value is defined outside traditional national qualifications systems. The report distinguishes international qualifications according to five broad differentiating elements:[10]

- purpose – what is the qualification for;
- type – how complete and which is the 'duration'' of the qualification;
- coverage – where is the qualification used (geographical dimension);
- competent body – which body awards the qualification;
- currency – what can the qualification be exchanged into.

EQF Note 5[11] also addresses the topic of international qualifications, referring to their variety by stating that "International qualification is not a precise term. These qualifications can include stateless qualifications (owned and operated outside the

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[7] European Commission (2014). Revised mandate of the AG EQF sub-group on International Sectoral Qualifications. Brussels, 19 March 2014.

[8] An earlier, slightly different, definition was presented at a conference on international qualifications in Riga, in 2014 (Conference: Opening up the NQF for International Qualifications). http://www.nki-latvija.lv/content/files/Boomgaert%2014.11.2014.pdf

[9] European Commission (2013). Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF. Update 2013. European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 5. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF%20131119-web_0.pdf

[10] Cedefop (2012). International qualifications. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4116_en.pdf

[11] European Commission (2013). Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF. Update 2013. European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 5. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF%20131119-web_0.pdf

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jurisdiction of a country), transnational qualifications (which may be owned or not by a country but which are used across the world), professional qualifications (which are defined and regulated by professional bodies that transcend national boundaries) and sectoral qualifications (that define qualification standards in a business sector regardless of the country)."

Except the analysis conducted by the EQF AG subgroup on International Sectoral Qualifications and the work of Cedefop, little concrete action has been taken so far to clarify the role of EQF in this context. This is due to several issues:

- The wording of the EQF Recommendation refers to a linkage between EQF and sectoral qualifications systems. There is, however, very little clarity about what is meant by this term;

- The EQF Advisory Group which is the main governance body of the EQF is composed primarily of Member States' representatives who are officials from qualifications authorities or ministries in charge of qualifications systems. In many countries, the relationship between qualifications from the formal education system and other types of qualifications is a highly sensitive topic. Many national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have not yet clarified whether and how these types of qualifications can be integrated in the NQF. Therefore Member States are very cautious about opening up the topic of referencing international sectoral initiatives directly to the EQF;

- The current governance structure of the EQF does not appear to be adapted to a process through which international sectoral bodies could create a linkage with the EQF. The current process and many of the EQF referencing criteria were designed and are suitable for the referencing of national qualifications frameworks or systems, led by national authorities. It seems that a different process would be needed for referencing international sectoral initiatives, but it is unclear what this process would entail;

- It is unclear whether there is a demand for creating a linkage with the EQF, from the side of these international sectoral bodies. It is also unclear whether these types of initiatives meet the fundamental EQF referencing criteria in particular the use of learning outcomes and the existence of clear and solid quality assurance processes.

In this context, the present study was designed to shed light on the nature of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives, their ambition to link with the EQF and the possibilities for establishing such linkages.

1.2 Objectives of the assignment including research questions

This study has two main purposes:

- To carry out a mapping of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives; and

- To identify and analyse options for potential linkages with the EQF.

The mapping was expected to review the main features of these initiatives and to understand their ambition for setting up linkages with the EQF.

The box below gives an overview of the main research questions that drove the enquiry.

The report is structured around the topics behind each of the research questions.

Box 2 – Overview of research questions

- What are the different types of initiatives related to international sectoral qualifications and how common across countries are they?

- How mature are these initiatives?

- How are these initiatives managed/ governed and what are the organisations involved?

- What is the relationship to national qualifications frameworks and the ambition to link to the EQF?

- Do the initiatives have explicit quality assurance policies in place and if so what are they?

- What are the problems and challenges of these initiatives and what potential solutions can be identified?

- What are the implications of the state of play of international sectoral qualifications for the EQF? What are the possibilities for linking this type of initiatives to the EQF?

1.3   Scope of the assignment

As already indicated in Box 1 above, the scope of this assignment was broader than international sectoral qualifications frameworks. The study looked at a broad range of types of initiatives. The intention was to:

- Identify as many international sectoral qualifications frameworks governed by official sectoral bodies (i.e. bodies that have a mandate to represent a sector), as possible. This includes international regulatory bodies in a given sector;

- Identify a selection of frameworks governed by bodies other than official sectoral bodies;

- The same was intended for qualifications systems, however, none of the initiatives identified could be classified as qualifications system as explained in section 2.1;

- Review a sample of international sectoral qualifications and standards.

The study kept a rather flexible approach to the understanding of the other two terms:

- Sectoral; and

- International.

The study looked at initiatives led by official sectoral bodies and regulatory bodies in a sector. However, the study also reviewed initiatives which focused on a specific profession rather than the whole sector. This also covered initiatives led by professional federations or associations. The study also reviewed a sample of initiatives led by private entities or non-for-profit entities which are broadly recognised in a sector/profession but which are not led by an official membership based body. The study did not look at qualifications which are awarded by a single international company as in-house certificates and only recognised within the organisation. However, the study did review a sample of qualifications awarded by private companies (such as Microsoft or Oracle), linked to the company products and recognised by a broad range of other organisations using these products.

In other words, the study looked at initiatives broadly recognised in a sector or a profession, independent of the type of organisations leading these initiatives. The types of organisations were a subject for the analysis as shown in section 5. The study did not analyse qualifications only recognised within a single company.

The term international could be understood in a very broad sense – i.e. as being recognised in more than one country. This, however, is the case for many 'national' qualifications. For example, many UK-based awarding bodies operate in Ireland or in Malta. Moreover, due to progress in implementation of Bologna process, national higher education qualifications are broadly recognised across the EU (and beyond). The study considered qualifications as 'international' if they are recognised in several countries. The term international was seen as being an additional clarification of the term sectoral to exclude national sectoral qualifications.

1.4 Structure of the report

This report is structured in line with the research questions of the study:

- Section 2 presents the study approach and the methodology followed;
- Section 3 gives an overview of the main types of initiatives identified and how frequent they are;
- Section 4 shows the stage of development of these initiatives and the extent to which they are used in practice;
- Section 5 presents the governance and management approaches of these initiatives as put in place by the organisations in charge;
- Section 6 presents the findings regarding the relationship with NQFs and the EQF;
- Section 7 gives an overview regarding the use of learning outcomes and of the quality assurance as part of the initiatives studied;
- Section 8 discusses the implications for the EQF
- Section 9 provides the conclusions and recommendations

The following annexes accompany the report:

- Annex 1 gives additional information for answering the research questions based on desk research and survey findings;
- Annex 2 presents the list of organisations interviewed;
- Annex 3 presents short fiches of all initiatives analysed in depth.

2 Approach and methodology

Other than the Cedefop study mentioned in the introduction[12], there was little published initial evidence about international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives when this study was launched. The approach to this study was therefore designed so as to:

- Identify a high number of relevant initiatives;

- Collect information on key features of these initiatives;

- Gather feedback from those organisations in charge of these initiatives about their willingness to create a link with the EQF and their views on different options to do so;

- Discuss with a selection of organisations in charge of relevant initiatives the implications of the study findings on the linkages with the EQF.

The study was purposefully designed to primarily collect the information from and views of bodies in charge of international sectoral qualifications and other initiatives. The approach was not designed to collect the views of Member States as this is part of future discussions the Commission will engage in. In other words, the study describes the characteristics of international sectoral qualifications initiatives from the viewpoint of the organisations in charge of them. It does not capture the views of public authorities in charge of education, training and qualifications systems. The only piece of information collected from Member States' authorities was data on the openness of NQFs to international sectoral qualifications. This information was collected from EQF National Contact Points (NCPs).

2.1 Understanding of key concepts and working definitions

Clarifying the vocabulary in this field was one of the objectives of the study but at the same time it was one of the main challenges the study team faced. In the desk research, survey answers and interviews there was great variety in the use of the terms such as qualifications framework, competence framework and qualifications system.

This section summarises the main issues with the vocabulary encountered during the study. It then presents the working definitions and explanations of the terminology that were ultimately adopted and are used throughout this report.

2.1.1 Issues with the terminology

The study title initially referred to both international sectoral qualifications frameworks and international sectoral qualifications systems. The initial survey was designed using the term qualifications systems but the analysis of results combined with the desk research showed that:

- The term qualifications system was confusing to most persons surveyed and interviewed in the context of international sectoral developments;

- None of the initiatives reviewed through desk research was referred to as a qualifications system;

- Most people who referred to their initiatives as systems, were in fact referring to a sequence or a family of qualifications; and

- None of the identified initiatives fit the definition of qualifications system as used by Cedefop[13]:

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[12] Cedefop (2012) *International qualifications*
[13] Cedefop (2014) *Terminology of European education and training policy*

> *all activities related to the recognition of learning outcomes and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. These activities include:*
>
> - *definition of qualification policy, training design and implementation, institutional arrangements, funding, quality assurance;*
> - *assessment and certification of learning outcomes.*

Most of the identified initiatives are:

- either a single qualification or a small number of qualifications managed and awarded by the professional/sectoral body in charge. In these cases, the arrangements existing around recognition of learning outcomes and other aspects, as per the definition, are often not all formalised as such;

- or they are about initiatives which serve as basis to define qualifications managed and awarded by other organisations. In these cases, the processes around recognition of learning outcomes, etc. are not actually part of the initiative. They are practices of organisations using the initiative.

As a result, it was concluded that it is not possible to talk about qualifications systems in the context of this assignment. Subsequently it was decided not to use this term for the rest of the study.

2.1.2 The terminology adopted in this report

Table 1 below gives an overview of the terms used in this study, their working definition or explanation. It also presents examples of each of the concepts.

Table 1.   Overview of the terms used

Term	Working definition or explanation	Examples
'Qualification'	'A formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards' Source: EQF Recommendation	
'International Sectoral Qualification' (**ISQ** or standalone qualification)	'Certificate, diploma, degree or title awarded by an international body (or a national body accredited by an international body) and used in more than one country, which includes learning outcomes (based on standards developed by an international sectoral organisation or an international company) relevant to a sector of economic activity.' Source: EQF Advisory Group subgroup on international sectoral qualifications	• the European Advertising Certificate offered by the European Association of Communication Agencies[14]; • the European Building Expert offered by AEEBC - Association of European Building & Construction Experts[15]; • the European First Aid Certificate developed by the European Committee for First Aid Education (EC First Aid)[16]
Sequence/ Suite/ Family of International Sectoral qualifications (**suite of ISQs**)	Several qualifications that are interrelated (e.g. they build on each other – beginner, intermediary level, etc.) or which concern a group of professions (e.g. several closely related professions in the same economic sector) working definition	• the qualifications offered by the Association Montessori Internationale[17]: Courses for Montessori Teachers: AMI Diploma Assistants to Infancy (0-3); AMI Diploma Children's House (3-6); AMI Diploma Elementary (6-12); and Courses for Montessori Assistants: AMI Classroom Assistants Certificate Assistants to Infancy (0-3); AMI Classroom Assistants Certificate Children's House (3-6);

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[14] http://certificate.eaca.be/
[15] http://www.aeebc.org/eurbe.html
[16] http://www.samaritan-international.eu/about-us-en/structure/european-committee-on-first-aid-education-ec-first-aid/
[17] http://ami-global.org/training

Term	Working definition or explanation	Examples
		AMI Classroom Assistants Certificate Elementary (6-12);
		• the certificates and qualifications offered by the International Society of Arboriculture[18] (e.g. ISA Board Certified Master Arborist; ISA Certified Arborist Utility Specialist; ISA Certified Arborist Municipal Specialist; ISA Certified Tree Worker Aerial Lift Specialist; ISA Certified Tree Worker Climber Specialist; ISA Certified Arborist);
		• the certificates offered by the SCRUM Alliance[19] (e.g. Certified ScrumMaster, Certified Scrum Product Owner, Certified Scrum Developer, Certified Scrum Professional, Certified Scrum Trainers, Scrum Alliance Certified Enterprise Coaches).
'International Sectoral Standard' (or **standard**)	Set of learning outcomes relevant for one or more occupations that is used for developing qualifications in at least two countries. These standards are developed/maintained by international sectoral organisations or other international or national bodies cooperating across countries but they do not necessarily award the qualifications. The qualifications that include these standards can be national ones (that might be included in NQFs as formal or non-formal qualifications). These qualifications could be entirely based on international sectoral standards (in which case they should be assigned to the	• the European Chainsaw Certificates[20]: Common qualification standards for chainsaw users throughout Europe were developed by the EFESC-European Forestry and Environmental Skills Council. These are minimum standards at four different levels. Only accredited training providers are able to use a special developed ECC logo (European Chainsaw Certificate) on their certificate for those individuals who pass the exams; • the European Qualification Standard for employees in the insurance industry[21]: developed by Eficert-European Financial Certification Organisation; • the STCW-Convention[22]: International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for

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[18] http://www.isa-arbor.com/certification/becomequalified/becomequalified.aspx
[19] https://www.scrumalliance.org/certifications
[20] http://www.europeanchainsaw.eu/
[21] http://www.eficert.org/

Term	Working definition or explanation	Examples
	same EQF level) or they could integrate international sectoral standards and add more national specificities/ learning outcomes descriptions (in this case they might be assigned to different EQF levels). Often institutions awarding these qualifications are accredited by the international body (i.e. to achieve the accreditation evidence has to be provided that the qualification delivered by the national organisation guarantees that the certificate holders have obtained the set of learning outcomes described by the standard). Working definition and description	Seafarers developed by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). The convention includes minimum training requirements for people working on a ship, including modular courses and the recognition of certificates issued by another country. Training and certification related to the STCW is provided by the Member Governments' Maritime Administrations. In some countries, the Maritime Administration issues certificates, in others also training providers (sometimes certified or accredited) can issue these certificates directly.
*International sectoral qualifications framework (**ISQF**)*	An instrument for the classification of qualifications from a specific economic sector according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved (i.e. clearly structured by levels); at least two countries are involved. ISQFs can be developed for a broader sector but often focus on a specific professional or occupational area. Working definition and description	• European Sectorial Qualification's Framework for Coast Guarding[23]; • Frontex Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Border Guarding[24]
*International sectoral competence framework (**ISCF**)*	A framework clearly structured by levels that sets out different levels of knowledge, skills and competences required by individuals to act in a specific field of activity or to perform specific job	• European e-Competence Framework.[25]

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[22] http://www.stcw.org

[23] http://www.ecgff.eu/project-menu

[24] http://www.ecgff.eu/images/ECGFANET_docs/SQF.pdf

[25] http://www.ecompetence.eu

Term	Working definition or explanation	Examples
	roles.	
	These frameworks are not populated with qualifications and they are rather developed as competence frameworks which can be used, for example, as reference for the development of qualifications in this sector (i.e. they can be used similarly to standards).	
	Working definition and description.	

2.2　Main sources of evidence

The methodology for this study combined desk research, online survey of international sectoral and professional organisation, interviews with organisations in charge of selected initiatives, rapid survey of NCPs and an expert workshop. The purpose and key features of each of the methods are presented below.

2.2.1　Desk research

The desk research had several functions:

- Identify a list of organisations relevant for this assignment;

- Carry out a rapid review of their websites to identify which ones guide relevant initiatives;

- For selected initiatives collect information on their characteristics in combination with interviews.

Desk research was carried out in three stages.

In the first stage, the preliminary desk research identified a list of international sectoral/ professional organisations that may 'own' international sectoral qualifications, frameworks or standards. About 800 organisations were identified. They were identified through:

- Review of the list of international qualifications identified during preparatory work on ESCO. This resulted in the identification of 243 organisations;
- Review of the Wikipedia list of international professional associations[26] and Hyperion list of European associations[27]. All entries were reviewed but only those organisations were retained which are still active (e.g. website still active and updated) and provide some type of training/ education activity (at this stage a broad definition of "education activities" was used in order to include as many organisations as possible, e.g. one day trainings, workshops, etc.). This resulted in the identification of 178 organisations;
- Review of the Directory of European Community Trade and Professional associations[28]. This resulted in the identification of about 297 organisations.
- Review of all the EQF related projects listed in the Adam database of lifelong learning programme funded projects. All projects were reviewed, however, only the only organisations retained were involved in projects that concerned the development of international qualifications or international qualifications frameworks. Organisations involved in projects concerning aspects such as permeability between education sectors, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, design of qualifications based on learning outcomes or linking NQFs to the EQF were not retained. This resulted in the identification of 56 organisations;
- Review of the study on "Mapping of existing international qualification standards of international sport federations" which covered international qualifications in the field of sport. This resulted in the identification of about 12 organisations.

A preliminary cleaning of the list was carried out in the subsequent stage. It identified those organisations that are most likely to lead relevant initiatives. This was done by excluding those organisations which did not have any indication on their website of such activities and which by their nature were less likely to be involved with relevant

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[26] Available at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_international_professional_associations
[27] Available at: http://www.hyperion.ie/euassociations.htm
[28] Available at: http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/directory-of-european-community-trade-and-professional-associations-pbCDNA12606/

initiatives (e.g. lobbies, interest groups, networks, etc.). As result of this exercise, 426 organisations were shortlisted for further research.

Websites of these 426 shortlisted organisations were reviewed in order to verify whether they actually manage initiatives of interest to this study and to collect additional information, in particular:

- Type of initiative
- Rationale behind the initiative
- Countries involved
- Link with NQF/EQF
- Quality assurance mechanisms.

Out of the 426 shortlisted organisation, 254 were confirmed to manage initiatives of interest to this study.

In the final stage of the assignment, desk research was carried out for those initiatives selected for in-depth interviews. Based on the interview topics guide the researchers first reviewed information available through desk research and this was complemented and verified through interviews.

2.2.2 Online survey of international sectoral organisations

The aim of the online survey was to:

- Get a preliminary view on different types of initiatives and their key features,

- Confirm which of the organisations identified through desk research were in charge of relevant initiatives;

- Gather first views on the interest for linking with the EQF; and

- Identify which of the organisations with relevant initiatives are willing to take part in in-depth interviews.

All 800 organisations identified as part of preliminary desk research were invited to respond to the survey.

The questionnaire agreed with the Commission was piloted with four organisations whose feedback was used to finalise the survey.

The survey was open for 4 weeks over March 2016. A total of three email reminders were sent to all organisations identified. In order to ensure a satisfactory response rate, phone follow-up was also arranged. Overall about 250 organisations were contacted over the phone.

In case of refusal to take part to the survey, the reason behind such decision was investigated and, when provided, registered. Seventy-four organisations expressly refused to take part in the survey. The most common reasons provided were 'lack of time' (n=24) and 'lack of interest' (n=20). Only 3 organisations stated to not be aware of the EQF.

A total of 165 responses were collected of which 86 organisations stated that they managed at least one initiative of interest for this study. However this number was somewhat reduced once the dataset was cleaned (see below).

Cleaning survey data and quality assurance

To ensure consistency of the data and to verify quality, data cleaning was carried out. This consisted of a review of the answers provided, identification of inconsistencies and their review, including, where possible, imputation of data based on organisations' websites.

A data cleaning exercise identified that of the 86 respondents who stated managing initiatives in the field of international qualifications, some (n=25) did not provide any information about the initiatives maintained. These 25 responses were verified to

ensure that despite the lack of specific information, the data provided was actually correct. Five responses, out of these 25, were identified as incorrect, as from the organisations' websites it is very unlikely that they provide any relevant initiatives. Therefore, out of the 165 responses, 49% (n=81) design, award or maintain qualifications, standards, systems and/or frameworks.

2.2.3 Short questionnaire for EQF NCPs

EQF NCPs were contacted to collect information from their side about the extent to which NQFs were open to international sectoral qualifications and relevant initiatives. The questions sent to them also asked them whether they were contacted by international sectoral organisations.

Emails were sent to the contact list provided by the client, and when necessary the email addresses were updated. The EQF national coordination points were asked the following questions:

- Whether the results of the 2015 survey[29], regarding if and how ISQs are included in NQFs, are still valid or there have been any changes in the meantime;
- Whether they have been contacted by international sectoral/ professional bodies with the request to link their qualifications, systems or frameworks to the NQF, and if so, which organisations contacted them and what the result was; and
- If international sectoral qualifications or related initiatives are referenced to the NQF. They were asked to provide the research team with the list of such initiatives.

The response rate by the EQF NCPs was very high, with a total number of 30 NCPs (out of 37 contacted) providing a reply by e-mail: Austria, Belgium-nl, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.

The EQF NCPs of those countries for which an NQF linkage of the initiatives was reported by the interviewees (see section 6), were contacted a second time for validating this linkage. Feedback was received from 7 NCPs out of 13 contacted NCPs.

In-depth interviews with organisations in charge of selected initiatives. The qualitative interviews provided the main evidence base for this report. Together with the detailed desk research they covered all the aspects of the research questions for this study.

Interviews were then conducted with 74 organisations[30] that were responsible for international sectoral qualifications, standards and frameworks. These organisations collectively covered 84 initiatives. The interviews examined in depth the characteristics of initiatives, including their:

- Rationale and labour market value
- Maturity and coverage
- Management and governance, including how the initiative is funded
- Relationship with NQFs and the EQF
- Use of learning outcomes and quality assurance processes

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[29] "Mapping of national procedures (in place or under development) for aligning International Sectoral Qualifications (ISQ) to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF)"

[30] The interviews were conducted by ICF: Daniela Ulicna, Luca Mobilio, Ali Zaidi, Xavier Platteau; and 3s: Simona Beschia, Mariya Dzhengozova, Julia Fellinger, Karin Luomi-Messerer, Janine Wulz.

Organisations were selected from the 276 organisations identified through both desk research and survey. The selection was based on the following criteria:

- type of initiative
- geographical coverage of the initiative
- number of people reached by the initiative.

A total of 126 organisations were contacted with a request for interview. Sixteen organisations refused the interview (the main reason was lack of time), twenty-seven never followed up either to the e-mail or phone calls. Eighty-three accepted the interview, but finally nine could not take place due mostly to time constraints.

Annex 2 gives an overview of the organisations interviewed and the initiatives they are in charge of.

2.2.4 Expert workshop

After the interviews, a workshop was held with organisations that were responsible for ISQ initiatives. The purpose of the workshop was to test the findings from the research and examine the strengths and weaknesses of potential options for strengthening the linkage between initiatives and the EQF.

The workshop took place in Brussels on the 23 June 2016. It was attended by the European Commission DG EMPL project manager and 12 organisations that managed international sectoral initiatives.

2.3 Discussion of the methodology

The methodology was structured so that it initially identified a 'long-list' of potential 'owners' of international sectoral qualifications, standards, frameworks, whose websites could then be examined to identify appropriate initiatives.

The study was able to develop a broad and rather comprehensive view of initiatives owned by sector associations and federations, as the starting point for the desk review was the Directory of European Community Trade and Professional associations. It is possible that the initial desk research skipped certain initiatives because these were not immediately visible on organisation websites. This is however likely to only represent a small number of initiatives. On the other hand there is likely to be a large number of vendor or private initiatives in the area of international qualifications. These are qualifications that can be recognised by a range of other companies in a given sector. Only a small number of such initiatives were included in the review as the intention wasn't to fully map such examples.

There were also some challenges in collecting and interpreting information from the primary research. In particular:

- **Desk research:** In some cases, there was not sufficient information on organisations' websites to assess whether initiative is relevant and how it can be classified. In some cases this was because websites were not up-to-date or the terminology used differs considerably.

- **Surveys:** The concepts used in the study were not always clear to respondents. For example, there were different interpretations of frameworks and standards, which did not necessarily relate to the definitions used in the study. However, these issues could be clarified in the qualitative research.

- **Learning outcomes:** the learning outcomes used by initiatives were not always made available. Consequently, it was not always possible to validate whether they were actually learning outcome descriptors.

- **QA processes:** Likewise, most interviewees were not able to provide copies of specific QA processes and consequently the processes described in the interviews could not be validated.

- **Link to NQFs.** The nature of initiatives' link to NQFs was not always clear from the interviews. This is due to the fact that some initiatives are basis for national qualifications – i.e. the national organisation in charge uses the standard to develop a national qualification. This is an indirect link between the initiative and the NQF (see section 6). In such cases it is not always possible for the NCPs to confirm or disconfirm the existence and nature of the relationship. To verify the affirmations about the existence of a linkage between an NQF and an initiatives the research team contacted NCPs to comment on the information given by the sectoral body in charge. Responses were received from 7 of 13 NCPs that were reported to have ISQs linked to their NQF.

- **Options appraisal:** The options assessment is drawn from the author's interpretation of the results from the study. The study did not discuss the options with national authorities however, and consequently the assessment of feasibility had to draw on assumptions on national authorities buy-in and support.

3   Main types of initiatives and how common they are

Main findings

- At least 254 organisations are in charge of one or several relevant initiatives (according to desk research).

- The vast majority of the initiatives analysed in-depth are single qualifications (11) or suites of qualifications (39), or standards (17). Only a small part are qualifications frameworks (9) or competence frameworks (8); the latter often also act as standards). None of the initiatives fits the definition of qualifications system

- These initiatives exist in a large number of sectors but some sectors are more prevalent than others. More than 20% of organisations interviewed manage initiatives related to human health and social services activities. The second most recurrent sector is arts, entertainment and recreation. There is also a high number of cross-sectoral initiatives.

- The large majority of identified organisations provide initiatives targeting highly skilled professionals. About a fourth target medium skilled professionals and only one relates to low skilled workers.

- The four purposes most often mentioned in the 74 interviews were: improving worker mobility; raising or securing the standards for a particular profession or qualification; followed by increasing the coherence of qualifications across countries; and improving the quality of training.

3.1   Number of initiatives identified

There are several hundreds of organisations which manage initiatives falling under the scope of this study. Based on the desk research, the study team identified 254 organisations that manage at least one initiative falling under the scope of this study. Several of these organisations manage more than one such initiative, as confirmed by the survey and the in-depth interviews.

As explained in the section 2.2.1 on methodology, the organisations whose websites were reviewed were primarily organisations identified as professional associations/ groupings or organisations engaged in EU projects related to the EQF. Only a small number of private companies that issue qualifications were identified. Therefore, it can be assumed that the total number of organisations involved with international qualifications and related initiatives is certainly high.

The in-depth interviews covered 74 organisations, which collectively managed a total of 84 initiatives.

Most initiatives identified by this study are international sectoral qualifications or suites of qualifications which are followed by standards. The number of international sectoral qualifications frameworks or competence frameworks is much lower.

About half of the initiatives discussed through interviews are suites of ISQs (n=39). These are followed by international standards (n=17) and single ISQs (n=11). Only 17 interviewees were responsible for international sectoral qualifications frameworks or competence frameworks. Figure 1 below provides a complete overview.

These trends were also confirmed by the desk research and survey which also found a majority of suites of qualifications or individual qualifications. See Annex 1, Figure 13.

It should be taken into account that the described allocation of initiatives within these categories is subject to some important limitation:

- definitions used in the study evolved within the process to better adapt to the nature of initiatives identified;
- often organisations use terminology that differs from that used in this study (for example classifying qualification frameworks as a competence framework) requiring the research team to correctly allocate the initiatives;
- in some cases it is still difficult to clearly draw a line between categories as, for example, a sectoral qualification can be also used as a base to develop a national qualification, making it difficult to classify it as a qualification or a standard (similarly, competence frameworks can be used as standards).

Figure 1. Type of initiatives identified through interviews
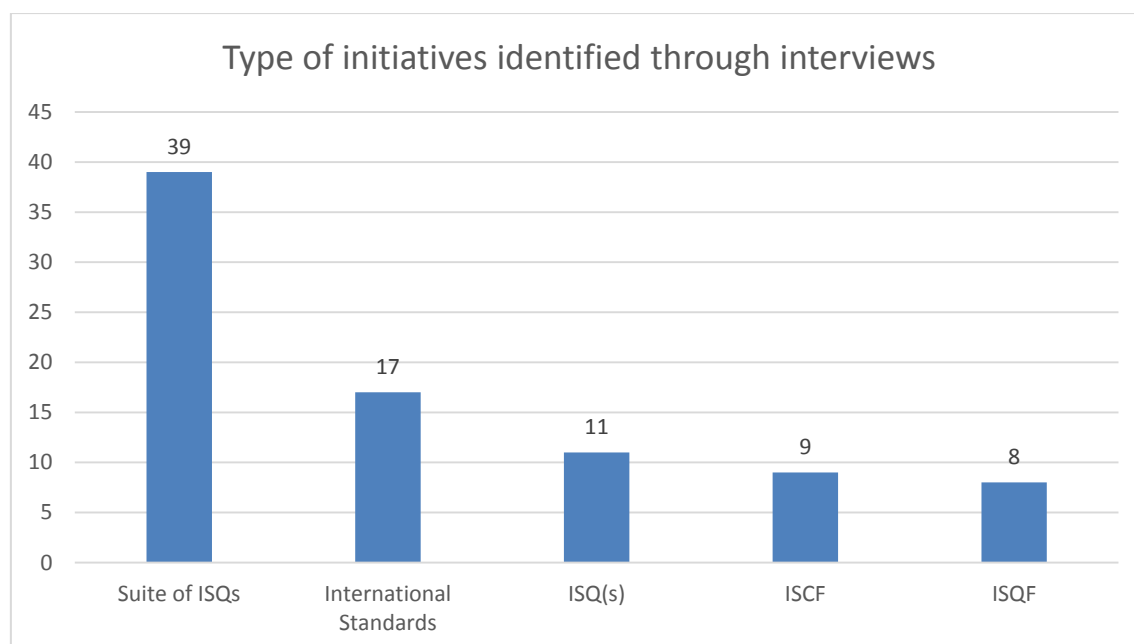
Source: Interviews

3.2   Main sectors and professions covered

International sectoral initiatives exist in a large number of sectors. The study found initiatives in 17 sectors. The most common sector was human health and social services activities, which covered 20% of all initiatives (n=16). This was followed by arts, entertainment and recreation (n=11), business administration (n=6), ICF (n=5) and finance, insurance and real estate (n=5).

There were also eight cross-sectoral initiatives. These covered occupations common in a range of sectors (such as Occupational Safety and Health Manager and Technicians qualifications, Certified ICT Specialist, Welders). Cross-sectoral initiatives refer to professions/ occupations which can be present in several sectors. Moreover, some also focused on some areas that were not defined in sectors, such as Humanitarian Aid.

There is a similar breakdown of sectors in the survey of organisations that are responsible for initiatives (see Annex 1, Table 10).

Figure 2. Economic sectors covered

Economic sectors covered

Sector	Value
Human health and social services activities	16
Arts, entertainment and recreation	11
Business administration	6
ICT service activities	5
Finance, insurance and real estate	5
Transportation and storage	4
Scientific and technical activities	3
Personal service -, administrative support service- and…	3
Public administration and defence and membership…	2
Hospitality and Tourism	2
Education	2
Construction	2
Media	1
Manufacturing of food, beverages and tobacco	1
Manufacturing of electrical equipment, computer,…	1
Energy and water supply, sewerage and waste…	1
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishery	1
Cross sectoral	8

Source: Interviews

Furthermore, the professions covered by the initiatives analysed were identified in order to understand who is targeted by these initiatives, i.e. which professional levels are addressed. For this purpose we identified three levels of professions:

- Highly skilled professions
    - Managers
    - Professionals
    - Technicians and associate professionals

- Medium skilled profession
    - Clerical support workers
    - Service and sales workers
    - Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers
    - Craft and related trade occupations
    - Plant and machine operators, and assemblers

- Low skilled professions
    - Elementary occupations.

The large majority of identified organisations provide initiatives targeting highly skilled professionals (n=58). About a fourth target medium skilled professionals (n=15) and only one relates to low skilled workers. A significant proportion of reviewed initiatives were top-up qualifications or qualifications that are mainly designed for people who already hold a different initial qualification.

Boxes 3, 4 and 5 below presents few examples of initiatives in the three most common sectors.

Box 3 – Examples in the field of human health and social services activities

<u>**Name of the initiative:**</u> European Care Certificate

Type: Stand-alone international sectoral qualification

Organisation that is in charge of the initiative: European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)

Number of users: There are more than 4,000 holders of the ECC certificate and more than 6,000 exam candidates in the database (as of March 2015)

Maturity: The initiative was developed in the context of three subsequent EU projects (2006 – 2008; 2009 – 2011; 2012 - 2014)

Link with NQF/EQF: The certificate is included in the UK NQF and explicitly refers to the EQF level 3

Description: The initiative was born as a consequence of the increase in labour mobility in the care sector. It aimed to develop a knowledge-based qualification care workers could use. The certificate has relevance for both 'receiving' countries – where the certificate works as a basic proof of qualification – and 'sending' countries - where it works as a means to improve care worker's chances on the labour market.

<u>**Name of the initiative:**</u> European Federation of Nurses Competency Framework

Type: International sectoral standard

Organisation that is in charge of the initiative: European Federation of Nurses (EFN)

Number of users: All general nurses in the EU, more than 3 million nurses are members of EFN

Maturity: The EFN Competency Framework is legally binding for all EU member states as of 18th January 2016.

Link with NQF/EQF: Qualifications based on the EFN Competency Framework can be included in NQFs are therefore linked to the EQF as well

Description: The initiative started as a common effort to mutually implement Article 31 of the EC's Professional Qualifications Directive, adopted in 2013[31].

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[31] Directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 amending Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications and Regulation (EU) No 1024/2012 on administrative cooperation through the Internal Market Information System ('the IMI Regulation') http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32013L0055

Box 4 – Examples in the field of Arts, entertainment and recreation

Name of the initiative: European Underwater Federation Certifications

Type: Suite of international sectoral standards

Organisation that is in charge of the initiative: European Underwater Federation

Number of users: 3,000,000 divers; 5,000 clubs; 60,000 diving instructors; 2,500 diving schools

Maturity: Experts from scuba diving training organisations and companies, consumer representatives and regulatory authorities have jointly developed a set of standards for training services in recreational scuba diving. These standards were published in 2004 by the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN).

Link with NQF/EQF: No

Description: The European Underwater Federation (EUF) "aims to be a totally inclusive platform for all recreational diving activities, whether voluntary or remunerated". The EUF developed European-wide standards for diving professions and activities in order to cope with the lack of uniformity or standardisation in the diving industry in Europe. For example, there was no standardised information for customers available to assess the quality of organisations providing diving.

The development of the EUF was both, consumer driven and driven by diving organisations to set minimum standards related to the safety of diving.

Name of the initiatives: Fitness Sector Qualification Framework

Types of initiative: International Sectoral Qualifications Framework and international sectoral standards

Organisation that is in charge of the initiative: EuropeActive

Number of users: about 35,000 fitness workers registered in the European Register of Exercise Professions

Maturity: the actual standards developed by EuropeActive in 2009 are the product of two consequent EU funded projects (in 2003 and 2007)

Link with NQF/EQF: yes, the standards are aligned with the EQF (levels 3 and 4), while the ISQF is aligned with EQF levels 2-6;

Description: In the mid-nineties, due to a fast growth, the fitness sector experienced an increasing labour mobility among fitness workers. At the same time, however, there was a lack of skilled workforce and no formalised structure for recognising the trainings of fitness workers.

EuropeActive also developed a Fitness Sector Qualification Framework. This is based mostly on occupational standards, which are specific descriptions of knowledge, skills and competence required to meet these standards (EQF level 2-5). The qualifications framework includes also a graduate entry programme, which is not based on standards, but on a professional profile (EQF level 6).

> **Box 5 – Example in the field of business administration**
>
> **Name of the initiatives:** European Business Competence Licence
>
> **Types of initiative**: Suite or family of international sectoral qualifications
>
> **Organisation that is in charge of the initiative**: EBC Licencing GmbH
>
> **Number of users:** More than 50,000 individuals have already obtained the certificate
>
> **Maturity**: The idea was born in 2,000 and the implementation of the EBC*L started in 2003 in Austria and Germany. Since then, it spread in many countries all over the world.
>
> **Link with NQF/EQF:** National representations in some countries are trying to include the ECB*L in the NQFs. In the Netherlands, the process to link the certificate to the NQF has already started.
>
> **Description:** The initiative, based on the idea of the ECDL, aimed at addressing the demand of employers to provide business management knowledge also to employees without a business management background. It was developed in close cooperation with a university (Fernuni Hagen) and employers. As the certification becomes more and more internationally recognised, it is improving mobility of certificate holders.

3.3   Purpose of these initiatives

This section describes the purpose and rationale that initiated the introduction of the initiatives at international level. Interview data shows that many of these initiatives have been developed as a direct response to specific sectoral needs. Very often, interviewees indicated multiple (often related) purposes rather than one sole 'trigger' for developing a particular initiative.

The four purposes most often mentioned in the 74 interviews were raising or securing the standards for a particular profession or qualification, improving worker mobility, followed by increasing the coherence of qualifications across countries and improving the quality of training.

Figure 3.   Purpose of initiatives reviewed (number of initiatives stating a given purpose)
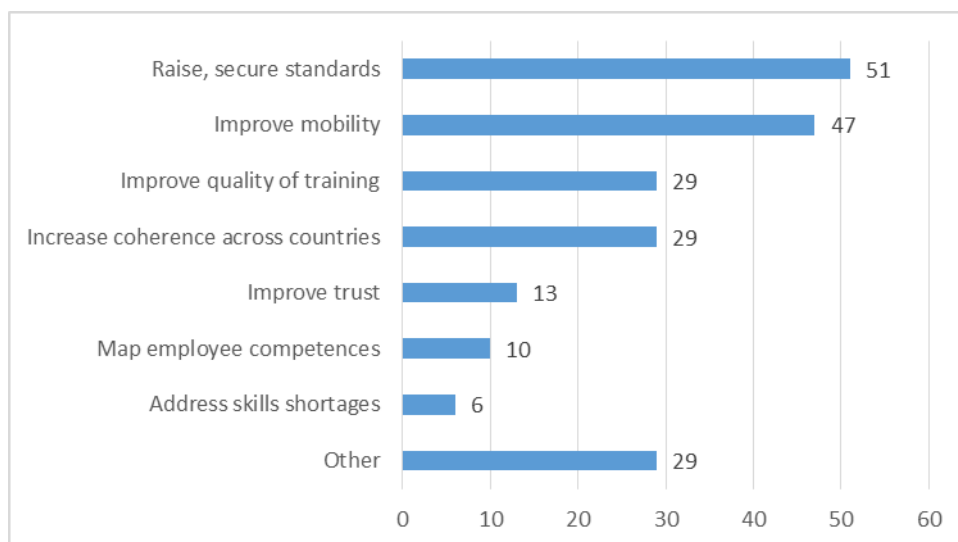
Source: Interviews

Table 2. Purpose of the initiatives by type of initiative (number of initiatives stating a given purpose)

Purpose of the initiative	ISQ(s)	Suite of ISQs	ISQF	ISCF	Internat. Standards	Total no. of mentions
Raise, secure standards	10 (91%)	24 (62%)	3 (38%)	4 (44%)	10 (59%)	51 (61%)
Improve mobility	7 (64%)	21 (54%)	7 (88%)	2 (22%)	10 (59%)	47 (56%)
Increase coherence across countries	4 (36%)	13 (33%)	3 (38%)	3 (33%)	6 (35%)	29 (35%)
Improve quality of training	4 (36%)	11 (28%)	2 (25%)	5 (56%)	7 (41%)	29 (35%)
Improve trust	1 (9%)	6 (15%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (12%)	13 (15%)
Map employee competences	0 (0%)	4 (10%)	3 (38%)	2 (22%)	1 (6%)	10 (12%)
Address skills shortages	1 (9%)	1 (3%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (12%)	6 (7%)
Other	3 (27%)	14 (36%)	4 (50%)	3 (33%)	5 (29%)	29 (35%)
Total no. of initiatives	11	39	8	9	17	84

Source: Interviews. Figures indicate how often a particular purpose was mentioned, with multiple answers being possible. Percentages in brackets indicate the share of a particular type of initiative, for which the respective purpose was mentioned.

The improvement of worker mobility was the most frequently mentioned purpose for the development of an initiative. Facilitating the movement of professionals across countries by having their qualifications recognised abroad was mentioned in 47 out of 74 interviews as one of the key purposes for introducing a given initiative.

Securing and or raising the standards for a particular qualification or professional activity is the second-most frequently mentioned purpose for the development of an initiative at international level (reported for 42 out of 84 initiatives).

Examples include:

- CIDESCO diplomas (Comité International d'Esthétique et de Cosmétologie) have been developed to define professional standards within the beauty therapy industry, to maintain educational standards and promote professional development.

- WCPT (European Region of the World Confederation of Physiotherapy) guidelines have been established to encourage the set-up of minimum common standards for the entry level education of physiotherapists.

- EFPA (European Financial Planning Association certifications) were introduced as a market-driven initiative, sparked by observed situations of wrong doing and

misconduct. In response, the sector wanted to emphasise professionalism and introduced a certification with a transparent and reliable exam to be maintained with an update every year.

Purposes related to an increased coherence across countries were referred to in one third of the initiatives (29 out of 84). Examples include:

- e-Competence Framework (CEN): The idea for a European competence framework for ICT skills was sparked by national sectors' request to 'export' their national competence systems to other countries to make them more comparable.

- EFAD dietitian standards: The qualification (e.g. clinical dietitian) is nationally regulated in many countries but not comparable across Europe. The European Dietetic Competences have been developed to address this problem, by establishing the minimum qualification requirements to work as a dietitian in any of the member countries of EFAD.

- Agroforestry Training in Europe (Agrosup Dijon): With agroforestry being a small and underdeveloped sector, there is a lack of training and the sector is not equally developed in all EU countries. The initiative aims to create a transfer of innovation including countries with a stronger background in agroforestry and those with a higher demand for training.

For one third of the initiatives (29 out of 84), the improvement of the quality of training was stated as a key purpose for their development. Examples include:

- European Handball Federation qualifications: The initiative aims to ensure good training quality for the next generation of handball players through better qualified trainers at every level.

- WFME Global Standards (World Federation for Medical Education): The WFME programme on definition of international standards in medical education was launched in 1997, to provide a mechanism for quality improvement in medical education, in a global context.

Purposes which relate to improving trust, mapping employee competences and combating skills shortages were mentioned significantly less often, although they play a more important role for distinct types of initiatives (see below).

'Other purposes' include the recognition of an activity as a stand-alone profession (European Handball Federation qualifications, European Certificate for Psychotherapy - ECP) or the professionalisation of a particular sector (e.g. Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework, FEI Coach Education Programme by the European Equestrian Federation, European Dietetic [Advanced]] Competences standard, European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC] framework and accreditation). Further aspects mentioned refer to raising the awareness of a particular qualification across Europe and to raising the employability of holders of a particular qualification.

Interestingly, the validation of non-formal and informal learning does not seem to play an explicit role as a purpose for developing a particular initiative (exceptions include the Fitness Sector Qualification Framework and the InHerit Competence Matrix).

Taking a closer look at the eight ISQFs studied, the primary purpose(s) for establishing ISQFs most often are related to the mobility of professionals (mentioned in 7 out of 8 cases) and to improving trust (in 4 out of 8 cases). The comparability or transparency of qualifications and the recognition of qualifications (both abroad and/or within the education sector) were particularly highlighted in interviews. Furthermore, the issue of improving trust seems to play a more significant role with ISQFs than it does with other types of initiatives.

With International Sectoral Competence Frameworks (ISCFs), improving the quality of training (mentioned for 5 out of 9 initiatives) and raising/securing standards (in 4 out

of 9 initiatives) were most often mentioned as key drivers for the development of such a framework. The improvement of worker mobility seems to play a lesser driver for the development of ISCFs.

Use of the initiatives in the labour market

Interview data provides information on how and to what extent the initiatives studied are used in the labour market. In the majority of cases (47 out of 74), the interviewees stated that their initiatives are not a legal or sectoral requirement. Instead they are voluntary and recognised as being of added value on the labour market.

Figure 4. The extent to which the initiatives are required or not
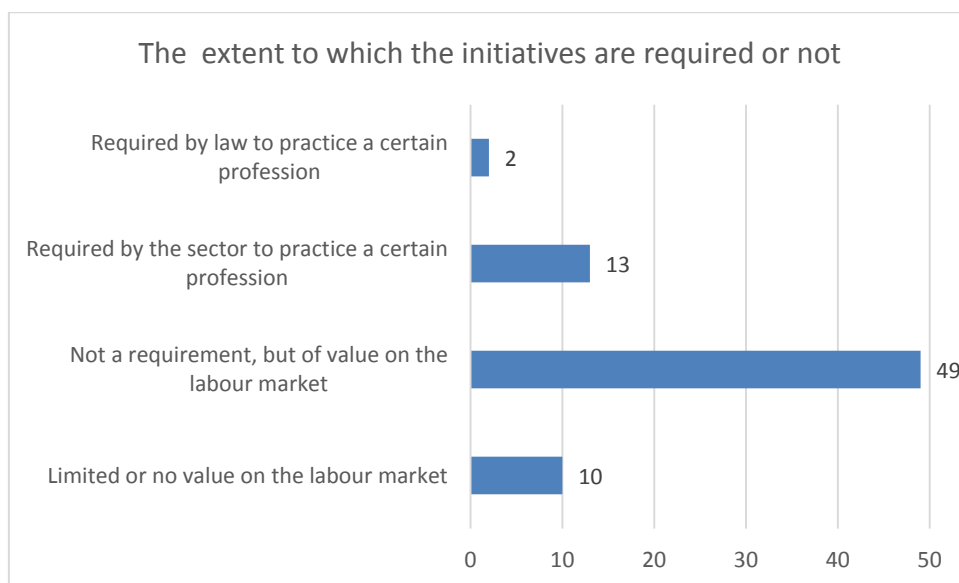
Source: Interviews

Nearly all of those initiatives with 'limited or no value in the labour market' refer to the results of EU-funded projects that have not been implemented (yet) and are therefore not used in the labour market. Their initial intention was to be of value in the labour market but for some reason their practical implementation was not possible, or has not yet been possible. All cases concerned refer to initiatives that can be considered recent or new (less than ten years of existence), and in many cases it was stated that the initiative has not (yet) been implemented, or not widely implemented. Examples include:

- The Logistics Qualifications Framework (Dekra Akademie) was developed between 2013 and 2015, as part of an EU-funded project. Although currently not implemented, it is expected that the interest in the initiative will increase as a result of an expected increased mobility of logistics professional over the coming years. There are plans to develop a governance structure in order to support the uptake of the initiative.

- Funeral Services Master Business Administration (FuSeMBA): This initiative was developed within an EU-funded project (2009). So far, three editions of FuSeMBA have been delivered. The impact has been estimated as rather low, which may also be related to the delicate nature of the profession. There are some challenges in attracting young people to enrol into the qualification programme, which is clearly reflected by the decreasing numbers of students of each of the three editions of FuSeMBA to date.

Only for two initiatives (EFN[32] Competency Framework and Train Driver Certificate) it was reported that they are required by law to practice a certain profession.

In thirteen cases, the qualification or standard is required by the sector to practice a certain profession. In the majority of these cases, this requirement is not universal but exists in a few or several countries only. Very few qualifications/standards are required by the sector on a broad geographical basis, examples include the below (see Box 6).

Box 6 – Examples which are required by the sector

European Handball Federation (EHF) qualifications:

The EHF qualifications are recognised by national federations and the European federation. While lower levels (level 1 and level 2) are provided by the national federations, levels 3 and 4 are provided by the EHF.

The qualifications are recognised at European level, as they are a requirement for positions in European competitions. The EHF aims for trainers with a trainer qualification at highest level (level 4) in all European competitions by 2020. Currently, the minimum requirement for participation in European competitions for trainers is level 3.

CTS - Certified Technology Specialist certificates (InfoComm International):

It is very common in the USA and Europe that tenders will mention in their staffing proposal the CTS certificate as a requirement for positions in the audio visual area.

While 21 of the 84 initiatives analysed in-depth refer to professions that are regulated in one or more countries[33], there is little evidence that these qualifications give direct access to the respective regulated profession. A direct relationship between an initiative and access to a regulated profession could only be confirmed in two cases, the EFN (European Federation of Nurses) Competency Framework (cf. Box 7) and the Train Driver Certificate.

Box 7 – Initiative providing access to a regulated profession

Train driver certificate (European Railway Agency):

The train driver certificate has been introduced through Directive 2007/59/EC, which establishes minimum requirements, which applicants should meet to obtain a licence or harmonised complementary certificate.

There were two rationales for introducing the Directive (including the certificate): a) to harmonise educational requirements for train drivers (particularly in relation to ensuring safety transport) and b) to facilitate free movement of workers across Europe. The second rationale can be explained with the gradual extension of access rights of international rail freight services, which has led to an increase in the movement of train drivers across national borders as well as growing demand for drivers trained and certified for operation in more than one Member State.

3.4 Main types of initiatives

As indicated in section 3.1, most of the 84 initiatives explored in detail (and covered in interviews) are international sectoral qualifications or suites of qualifications or

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[32] European Federation of Nurses
[33] These 21 initiatives refer to the following types: 4 ISQs, 7 suites of ISQs, 1 International Sectoral Qualifications Framework, 1 International Sectoral Competence Framework, and 8 International Standards.

standards. In addition, the sample included eight international sectoral qualifications frameworks and nine international competence frameworks.

Among ISQs and suites of ISQs, the following broad types can be observed, based on their intended function:

- (Suites of) ISQs which aim to certify the achievement of a specific set of learning outcomes. Examples include CELTA, DELTA (Cambridge English Language Assessments), Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) qualifications, AMI diplomas and certificates (Association Montessori International) or ECDL- European Computer Driving Licence.

- (Suites of) ISQs which aim to improve the transparency and comparability of education and training within a given sector.

- (Suites of) ISQs which aim for harmonisation/a setting of common minimum standards for a particular professional activity. Example: Train driver certificate.

- (Suites of) ISQs which aim to establish a new qualification/career path to respond to specific sectoral skills needs. Examples include the Funeral Services Master Business Administration (FUSEMBA) and the European Tour Managers Certificate.

Among the international sectoral competence frameworks, three broad types can be identified. Half of them were initiated through EU-funded projects (4 out of 9 initiatives[34]).

- Several competence frameworks are related to ISQs or suites of ISQs, i.e. the qualification(s) is/are based on a competence framework which describes the competences of a professional in a given area[35]. Examples include the Competency Framework of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, the ITAbook competency framework (Association for all IT Architects), and the CIPD Profession Map (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).

- A second group of ISCFs essentially assumes the role of a standard. For a specific profession, it defines the typically required competences which are expected to be certified in a qualification that leads to that profession. One example would be the EUR-ACE competence framework (European Federation of National Engineering Associations).

- The third type of competence frameworks mainly functions as a transparency tool to understand and compare different qualifications linked to a specific professional area. In fact, they fulfil a similar function as a qualifications framework except that they contain more detailed competence descriptions than a qualifications framework and there is not necessarily a process of linking qualifications to the competence framework. Examples include the European e-competence framework and the Sectoral Competence Framework for Energy Efficiency and Fire Prevention.

A closer look at the international sectoral qualifications frameworks reveals that the majority are initiatives that were started as EU-funded projects (7 out of 8 initiatives). They are transparency tools developed in sectors/ professional areas where there is a relatively high variety of professions and qualifications. All of them refer to EQF levels, with most of the initiatives directly being modelled on them. Some ISQFs specifically use the EQF level descriptors and translate them into descriptors specific to the respective sector (e.g. EFICERT, Logistics Qualifications Framework). Three broad groups of ISQFs can be identified:

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[34] One additional initiative was not based on an EU-funded project but received EU funding.

[35] The two ISCFS studies which have not been based on an EU project fall into this first category.

- ISQFs which intend to link national qualifications to this framework or to support the development of qualifications (identification of gaps), which then can be linked to the framework. Examples include the Logistics Qualifications Framework (Dekra Akademie).

- Some ISQFs are additionally used as a basis for professional certification, i.e. the qualifications framework functions in connection with a certification system for the respective profession. Examples of such a framework include the EFICERT qualifications framework (European Financial Certification Organisation), the European Marketing Confederation Qualification and Certification Framework (EMCQ) and the Fitness Sector Qualification Framework.

- Furthermore, the aspect of professionalisation of a certain activity seems to play an important role in several of the ISQFs studied. Several initiatives specifically stated that their ISQFs are intended to 'formalise' education and training, thus helping the recognition of qualifications, in particular in areas where there is a lack of formal qualifications. For example:

  - The Logistics Qualifications Framework (Dekra Akademie) intends to address the fact that, in the logistics industry, many people do not have a formal qualification, and to support the development of new qualification based on the identification of skills shortages.

  - Most coaching qualifications in Europe are delivered by national federations. The International Sport Coaching Framework (ISCF) aims to improve the recognition of coaching qualifications, and achieve the recognition of coaching as a profession.

  - The Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework aims to respond to lack of formal qualification and recognition of qualifications in the humanitarian action sector. There is a growing number of professions in the field; many professionals in the sector have long-term experience in the field, but no formal education.

The international standards studied often refer to activities which are considered as a regulated profession in one or more countries (in 9 out of 17 initiatives labelled as international standard). Examples include the European Dietetic (Advanced) Competences (EDAC) standards, the European Federation of Nurses Competency Framework, the EFRS benchmark for radiography education and the WFME (World Federation of Medical Education) Global Standards. In terms of sectoral prevalence, half of the international standards studied can be attributed to the human health and social services sector (8 out of 17), and another four to the arts, entertainment and recreation sector. Based on their characteristics, the following types of standards can be identified:

- International standards which serve as a benchmark or minimum requirements to institutions that offer, or are in the process of developing education and training in a given field. Examples include the EFRS benchmark for radiography education, the WCPT guideline for physical therapist professional entry level education, the World Federation of Medical Education Global Standards, and the EFAD dietician standards. They are not directly linked to an accreditation procedure.

- International standards which set minimum requirements for education and training in a given field, and which are accompanied by an accreditation procedure for institutions or individuals. I.e. if a national association, provider or individual wants to obtain membership and/or a certain title, they must prove that they meet the minimum education and training standards in order to be accredited. Examples include the European Family Therapy Association

(EFTA) minimum training standards, and the European Underwater Federation Standards, and the European Building Expert (EurBE).

- In a few cases, the international standards are related to an international sectoral qualifications framework, as it is the case for the EuropeActive standards for fitness, and the International Coaching Degree Standards.

Among the international sectoral competence frameworks, three broad types can be identified. Similarly to international sectoral qualifications frameworks, most of them were initiated through EU-funded projects (6 out of 9 initiatives).

- Several competence frameworks are related to ISQs or suites of ISQs, i.e. the qualification(s) is/are based on a competence framework which describes the competences of a professional in a given area[36]. Examples include the Competency Framework of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, the ITAbook competency framework (Association for all IT Architects), and the CIPD Profession Map (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).

- A second group of ISCFs essentially assumes the role of a standard. For a specific profession, it defines the typically required competences which are expected to be certified in a qualification that leads to that profession. One example would be the EUR-ACE competence framework (European Federation of National Engineering Associations).

- The third type of competence frameworks mainly function as a transparency tool to understand and compare different qualifications linked to a specific professional area. In fact, they fulfil a similar function as a qualifications framework except that they contain more detailed competence descriptions than a qualifications framework and there is not necessarily a process of linking qualifications to the competence framework. Examples include the European e-competence framework and the Sectoral Competence Framework for Energy Efficiency and Fire Prevention.

As already indicated in the section on methodology, none of the initiatives corresponds to the notion of international sectoral qualifications system whereby the system would be defined by an explicit set of rules and practices about how qualifications are designed, quality assured and awarded. Some organisations manage several qualifications but these do not constitute a qualifications system as such.

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[36] The two ISCFS studies which have not been based on an EU project fall into this first category.

# 4   Maturity of initiatives identified

Main findings

- Most of the initiatives examined in depth had a significant number of users (organisations that held qualifications or certificates based on international qualifications, standards or frameworks). Two thirds of initiatives (n=33) has over 5,000 members, and a further 10 had between 1,000 and 5,000 users.

- The majority of the organisations mapped operate worldwide and do not focus specifically on the European market (n=42). The remaining thirty-two are mostly active in Europe and about one third of those (n=12) in all or almost all European countries.

- Slightly more than half of the interviewees (n=40) stated that the initiatives were well established (operational for more than 10 years). However, a significant share of the interviewees stated that the initiatives were relatively new (defined as around 2 years or less).

- One-third of all interviewees indicated that their initiatives were developed (or further elaborated) in one or more EU projects. Some of these projects were carried out more than ten years ago.

- There are indications from the interviews that recent developments of EU tools, and policies aiming to foster transnational cooperation in education and training, have encouraged sector organisations to develop international sectoral qualifications initiatives.

4.1   Number of users

In the study, users are defined as holders of qualifications or certificates based on international qualifications, standards or frameworks. In other words they are people who obtained a sectoral qualification issued by one of the analysed organisations or a qualification that is based on international sectoral standards.

Figure 5 below show about two thirds of these initiatives where user information was available (n=33) reach more than 5,000 people. A further 10 had between 1,000 and 5,000 users. In 13 cases this data was not available.

Figure 5.   Number of user of ISQs, suites of ISQs, international standards

Number of user of ISQs, suites of ISQs, international standards (n=67)
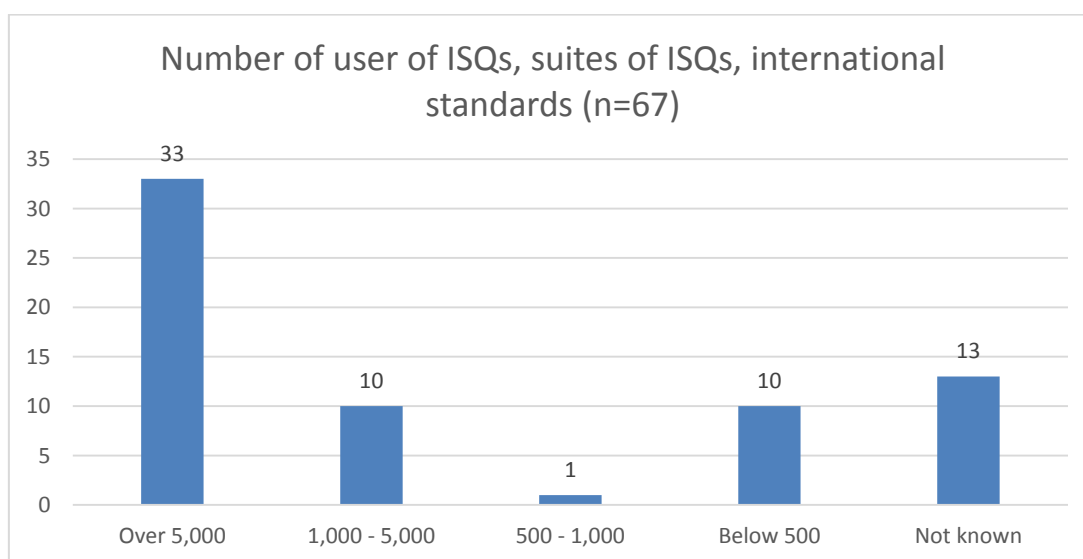
Source: interviews

Figure 6. Number of user of ISQs, suites of ISQs, international standards per typology

Number of user of ISQs (n=11), suites of ISQs (n=39), international standards (n=17) per typology

	Over 5,000	1,000 - 5,000	500 - 1,000	Below 500	Not known
ISQ(s)	5	1	0	3	2
Suite of ISQs	23	7	1	3	5
International Standards	5	2	0	4	6
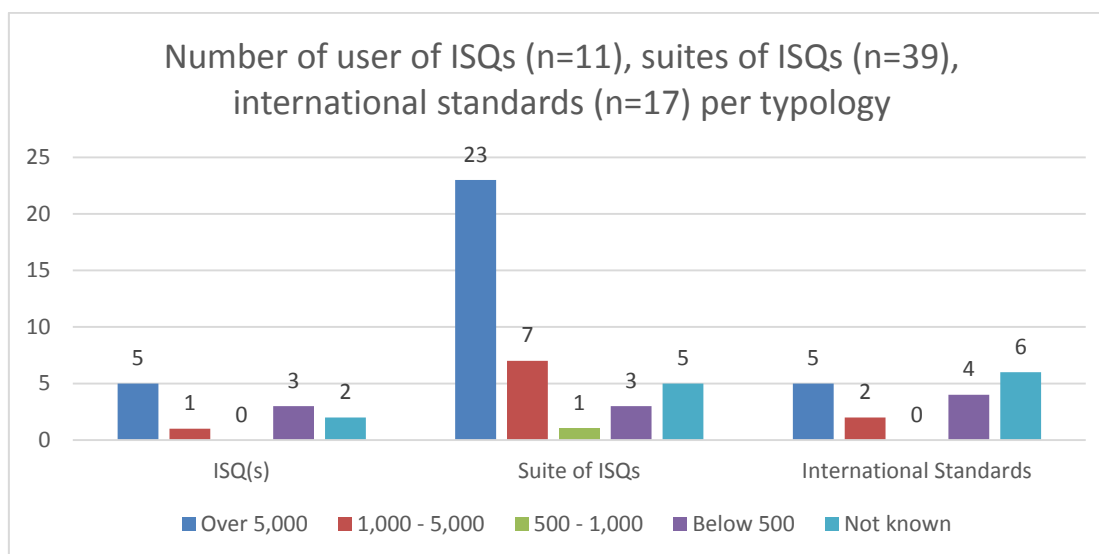
Source: Interviews

When considering qualifications frameworks or competence frameworks the term user refers to number of organisations using the framework. This information was rarely available. Moreover, in some cases the qualifications frameworks identified are developed by organisations that provide aligned/referenced qualifications themselves (e.g. Association for all IT Architects; Chartered Institute of Management Accountants). This means that the user 'organisations' are not necessarily distinguished from the user 'individuals'.

Box 8 below gives an overview of the number of users of selected ISQFs and ISCFs.

Box 8 – Information on users' of ISQFs and ISCFs

International sectoral qualifications frameworks

The European Marketing Confederation Qualification and Certification Framework (EMCQ) *(European Marketing Confederation)*

Three members of the EMC (the Netherlands Institute of Marketing; the Swiss professional association for marketing specialists and executive managers; the Chartered Institute of Marketing in the UK) have been accredited against the EMCQ Framework. In this way, over 20 different marketing qualifications were referenced to the Framework.

Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework *(European Universities on Professionalisation on Humanitarian action)*

Seventeen universities which are members of the Network On Humanitarian Action (NOHA) linked their qualifications to the Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework.

Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Coast Guard Functions *(European Coast Guard Functions Forum / European Coast Guard Functions Training Network)*

It is estimated that more than 300 organisations related to coast guard functions across 25 countries[37] could be using the CGFSQF. However, the exact numbers are not available.

International sectoral competence frameworks

EUR-ACE engineering framework (European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education)

Each year, more than 1,000 courses are certified as falling under the set of standards (including learning outcomes) defined by the framework.

EUColComp – Competency Framework for VET in Collections Management *(Natural History Museum London)*

Two institutions (the NHM London and the NHM Berlin) are currently using the framework. A total of 140 people have been trained on the basis of the competence framework.

InHerit Competence Matrix *(Landcommanderij Alden Biesen)*

This framework, developed in the context of an EU project, formalises the competences required in the heritage interpretation sector. Nine organisations are currently working with the project outcome, 17 people have taken part in the first organised trainings based on the competence framework.

Source: Interviews

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[37] Countries whose coast guards were involved in the development of the framework: Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom. It is planned that the coast guards from the remaining 14 countries member of the European Coast Guard Functions Forum will also use the CGFSQF (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, Iceland and Norway)

4.2 Geographical focus

The vast majority of initiatives identified are used in quite a large number of countries (i.e. most EU Member States or even worldwide). The majority of the initiatives mapped operate worldwide and do not focus specifically on the European market (n=42). The remaining thirty-two are mostly active in Europe and about one third of those (n=12) in all or almost all European countries.

'Suites of qualifications' are the most frequent type encountered at international level (n=31). On the other hand, out of the eight 'Qualifications Frameworks' analysed only two are used outside the EU. This could be explained by the fact that many of the qualifications frameworks were initiated in the context of the EQF development (see section 4.3).

4.3 Background of initiatives analysed

Representatives of organisations interviewed were asked about the tradition of the initiatives they were reporting about. Slightly more than half of the interviewees stated that the initiatives were well established (operational for more than 10 years). A small share of the interviewees stated that the initiatives were relatively new (defined as around 2 years or less). The detail of these answers is presented in Figure 7 below.

In some cases, organisations that provide more than one type of initiative were not able to provide distinct data for all their initiatives. In order to present the data in a consistent way this data is analysed considering the oldest relevant initiatives provided/managed by an organisation.

Figure 7.   Level of maturity of the initiatives (per number of organisations)
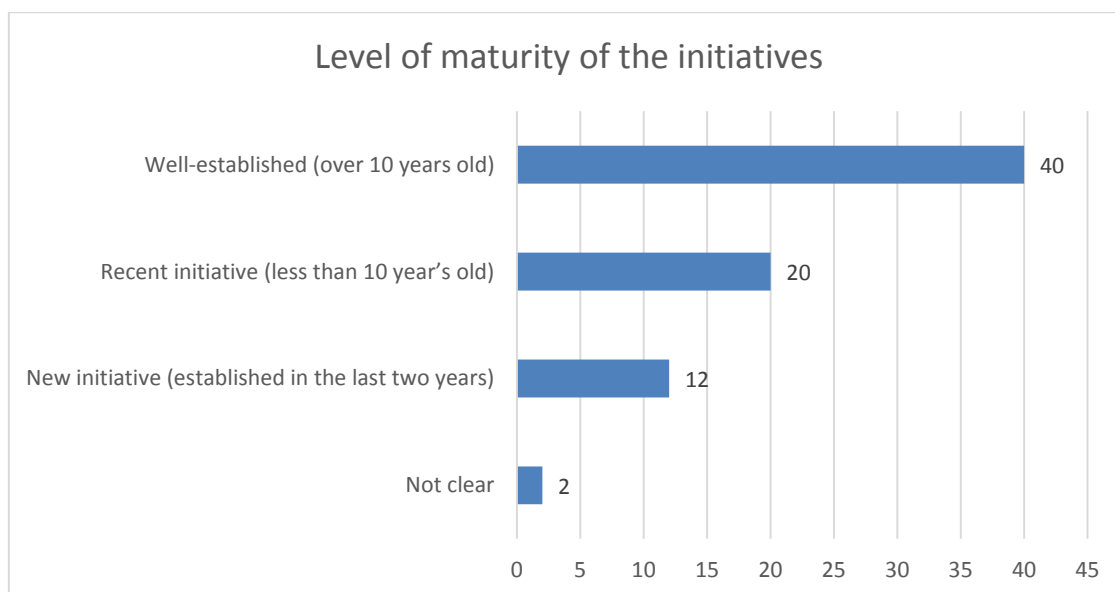
Source: Interviews

The majority of suites of qualifications identified by this study are considered as well established (i.e. more than ten years old): 28 (of 39 identified in this study).

One-third of all interviewees indicated that their initiatives were developed (or further elaborated) in one or more EU projects. Some of these projects were carried out more than ten years ago.

The age of these initiatives is not necessarily an indication of how well they are implemented and how many users they have. Overall, nearly two thirds of those initiatives that are more than ten years old also indicate that they also have a high number of users (over 5,000), which is same as proportion for all initiatives. Some

well-established initiatives, particularly those resulting from EU projects, are sometimes struggling with implementation beyond the lifetime of the project.

4.4   Relationship with European and national developments

There are some indications that recent developments of EU tools for transparency and mobility, as well as policies aiming to foster transnational cooperation in education and training, have been a spur in encouraging some sector organisations to develop international sectoral initiatives. According to the sample represented in our study, these developments refer to all types of initiatives and in particular to a growing interest in using the EQF and its underlying principles as a reference for designing the initiatives. The EQF is used as a translation tool for supporting comparison and understanding of sectoral qualifications from different countries and for identifying similarities and differences. It is also used for the common design of international sectoral qualifications and frameworks by using the level descriptors of the EQF as reference for developing learning outcomes descriptions.

NQFs might play a rather indirect role in this context (in many countries their development is closely linked to the EQF implementation) but there is less evidence to show that the growing development of international sectoral initiatives, which are often not part of a formal education and training system, is fostered by NQF developments. However, there are some indications that there could be a growing demand for including qualifications offered outside the formal system into an NQF in the future in order to enhance their visibility and emphasise their equal value. Moreover, as workers become more aware of the increasing recognition given to national qualifications, they are likely to demand similar recognition for international qualifications in their own country and, in case of labour mobility, also in a host country. Thus, international sectoral bodies usually cooperate with their members in different countries in developing their initiatives and at the same time they seek to establish stronger links with national education and training systems. This dual focus can be quite challenging and might be one of the reasons why a majority of organisations would rather prefer a direct linkage to the EQF than to NQFs (see sections 6.3, 6.4 and 8).

A few organisations operating outside the EU reported that they consider the EQF as a tool to improve the recognition of their initiatives in Europe. For example, the Institute of International Auditors, which has most users based in North America of Asia, examined linking to the EQF in order to improve the recognition of their qualifications in the EU.

5   Management and governance

Main findings

- The vast majority of initiatives are managed by organisations that are membership based. They represent either organisations or individual professionals. Only a small part of initiatives discussed through interviews were managed by companies or education institutions.

- Most organisations have some form of internal monitoring and updating system in place. The most common set-up in more formalised arrangements is a specialised group which meets regularly to discuss developments and ensure relevance (e.g. committees or expert groups). The frequency of the updating process varies but is often done every 2-3 years.

- The most common arrangement for financing the organisations and thereby directly or indirectly financing the international sectoral initiatives are assessment or certification fees, followed by membership fees and licensing or accreditation fees or charging course tuition fees. 30 organisations indicated that they received EU funding for their initiatives, usually at the development stage.


5.1   Type of organisations in charge of the initiatives

The nature of organisations in charge of international initiatives in this area is an important aspect to be considered when discussing linkage to the EQF and sometimes concerns are raised. The reasons for these concerns are not always explicitly formulated and they are also not the subject of this study. However it can be assumed that the concerns come from the following expectations and worries about future developments:

- In cases where the bodies in charge of initiatives directly linked to the EQF are not representative of a sector or a profession, there is a risk that initiatives with weak relevance to the labour market will be linked to the EQF. This could be contrary to the initial objectives of the EQF. It could send individual learners a positive message about the qualification while the reality could be that the qualification in fact has little recognition;

- Direct links between the EQF and international initiatives could create competition for national qualifications (those developed and awarded by public, sectoral/ professional or private bodies);

- In cases where the organisations making a direct link with the EQF are not representing a sector/ profession, but merely their own interests, trust in the EQF may be undermined. The notion of qualification differs still quite substantially from one EU country to another, but most countries would agree that a qualification certifies a range of skills and competences that is applicable in a range of contexts. Some organisations – so called vendors – certify only the capacity of the person to work with their own 'products'. This is for many countries a narrow conception of the notion of qualification. In most countries such qualifications would not be able to be referenced to a national qualifications framework.

More than half of analysed initiatives are managed by membership based bodies (n=50). These are divided into federations and associations that count as member sectoral bodies and professional organisations (n=29) and organisations that have individual professionals and companies as members (n=21). This is similar to the survey responses (see figure 14 in Annex 1).

Figure 8. Type of organisations in charge of the initiatives
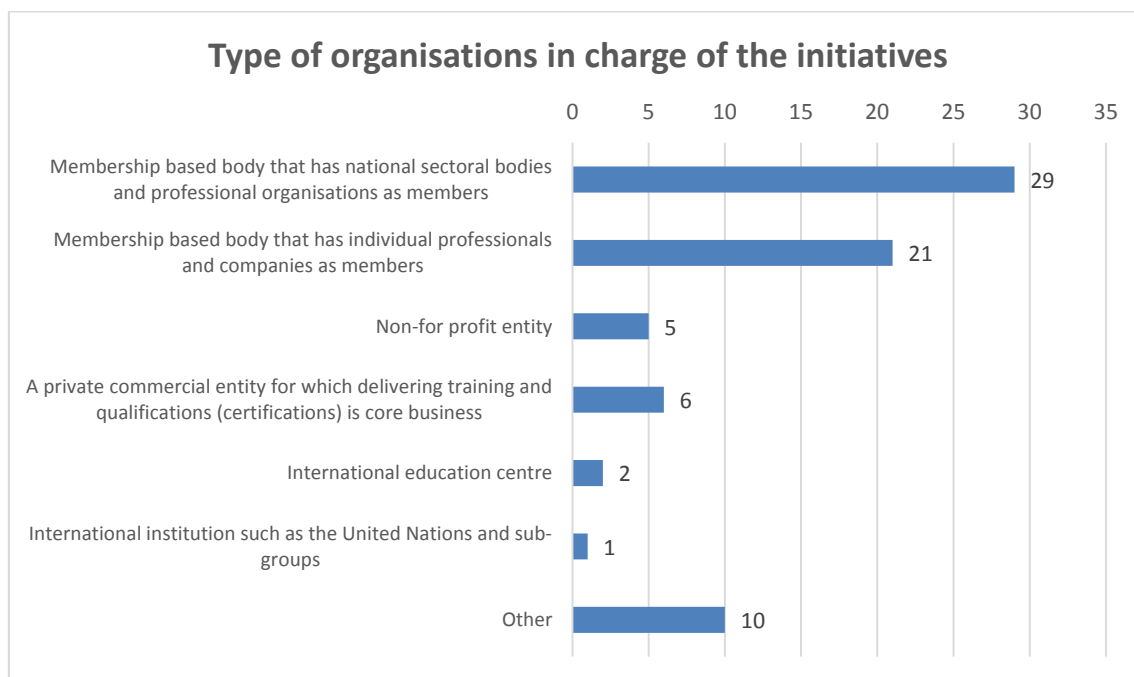
Source: Interviews (note: 'non-for profit entity' was in several cases mentioned together with one of the other categories; however, these cases are not presented in this figure)

The following observations can be made about the type of organisations in charge of these initiatives:

- The majority of organisations identified through desk research[38] are federations or associations in a given sector or profession. However, it is not clear whether they represent a large number of members or not. The notion of sector or profession behind these associations is also very varied. In some cases a broad range of sectors is covered (e.g. banking and financial services) but in others it is very narrow (e.g. wedding planners). Analysis of the database collected through desk research shows that very narrow professions represent a minority of entries.

  Examples of organisations in this category are: European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians; Council of European Professional Informatics Societies; European Federation of Funeral Services; various international sport federations; Union of European Railway Engineer Associations; European Logistics Association.

- Another group of bodies identified are international sectoral or professional training organisations. These can be for-profit or non-for-profit but their main mission is training and certification.

  Examples of such bodies are: European Banking& Financial Services Training Association, International TEFL and TESOL Training, ECDL foundation, International Software Testing Qualifications Board, European Center for Leadership and Entrepreneurship Education.

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[38] Desk research identified 254 organisations managing relevant initiatives

- The number of vendors in the sample of organisations identified through desk research was relatively small and they were mostly in the IT sector (e.g. Apple, SAP, Microsoft, Oracle).

- A fourth group of organisations are training bodies that were initially national but which have over time developed international activities. Examples are: City and Guilds (UK awarding body and training provider with a broad range of international activities), Pearson education (same situation as City and Guilds), DEKRA Akademie (initially a German training body in the automobile and transport sector which a number of branches in other countries and very active as coordinator of or partner in EU projects).

In the survey, organisations were asked to provide information on the number of their members (in case the organisation was membership based). The numbers differ very much depending on whether the members are organisations or individuals. There is also a difference when the members of the European organisations are national bodies which have their own members. In such case 30 members could in fact imply high representativeness. This data can therefore not be considered as fully reliable but rather as a proxy. It suggests that most of the respondents have a reasonably broad membership base.

Figure 9.   Number of initiatives according to number of organisation's members
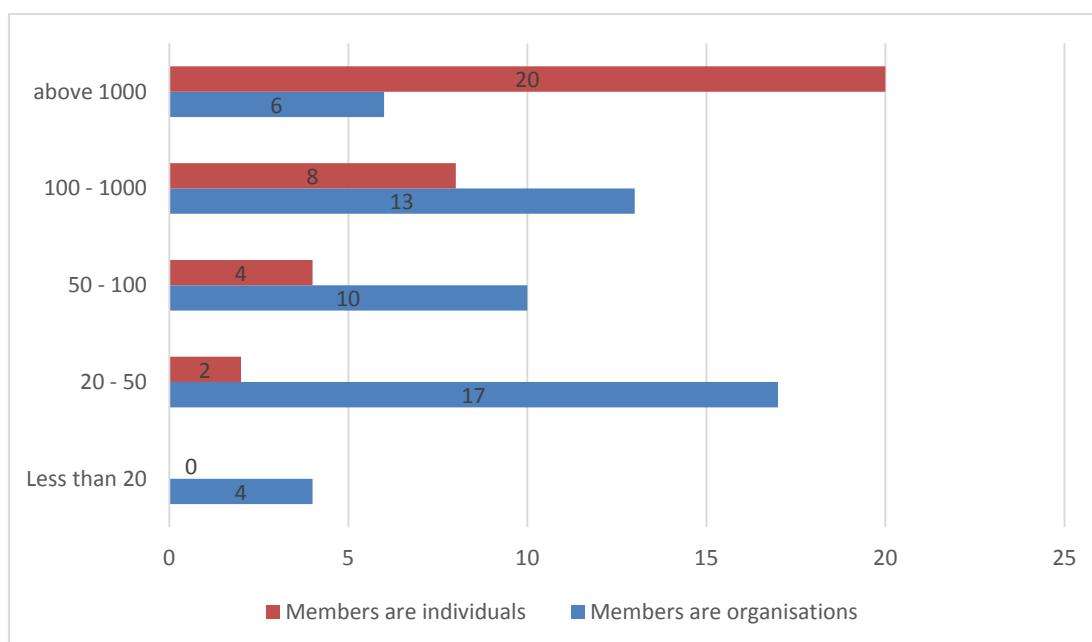
Source: ICF survey of international sectoral organisations

5.2   Arrangements to ensure relevance of the initiative

This section presents the extent and ways organisations monitor and update their initiatives in order to ensure their relevance for the labour market.

Many interviewees did not clearly describe arrangements for ensuring of relevance of the initiative, but simply stated that the organisation's board, the president, the head of the organisation or its General Assembly (or similar groups of representatives) take care of these tasks.

The most common set-up in more formalised arrangements (n=17) is a specialised group which meets regularly to discuss developments and ensure relevance. This group may be a committee, a group of experts or an advisory board, often comprised of sector experts and/or educational experts.

In membership organisations, these committees are most commonly made up of national representatives or representatives of the different types of members (e.g. training organisations, labour market representatives, members of councils or committees etc.). Examples for these committees or groups of experts are: coordination group, standards committee, training standards committee, monitoring committee, scientific committee, advisory board or scientific council.

Updating processes in order to ensure the initiatives' relevance range from unstructured to highly structured arrangements: some organisations hold regular annual or bi-annual meetings, others hold meetings on ad-hoc basis in order to discuss updates and trends of their sectors. In one initiative, for example, the ideas for updating developed within a small group of experts are shared with a board of examiners. Afterwards, the agreed proposals will be communicated globally for gathering feedback, and additional feedback will be gathered directly from company contacts and 'key opinion formers'. In another initiative, an annual conference is organised, where opinions are exchanged among participants in a more unstructured way.

In a few initiatives, internal teams are set up in order to develop principles and proposals for revision that are directly put into practice, but most initiatives also include a variety of internal and external stakeholders, in order to gather extensive feedback from the sector. Internal feedback might be gathered by consultation of members or assessors. External feedback collection makes use of tools such as candidate surveys, student questionnaires, or employer research. Feedback is gathered from national or international sector experts, such as sector skills councils or social partners. Some initiatives make use of big events in order to exchange opinions and trends, such as annual conferences or employers' forums.

Initiatives relying on accredited training providers often have re-accreditation procedures in place, in order to be able to ensure up-to-date trends can be reflected in the initiatives' curricula.

Some initiatives, mainly those developed in the course of EU funded projects, do not (yet) have a system in place for updating the initiative – it is only done informally by the former project partners, in the best case through a follow-up project, or in the worst case not at all.

To conclude: the majority of initiatives have internal processes in place in order to ensure their relevance, a few also rely on external input. The extent and time-frame of the implemented monitoring measures vary considerably.

5.3   Financing

This chapter describes the funding arrangements of the initiatives covered in 74 interviews. They are described in general, by type of initiative and by type of organisation. Multiple answers were possible in all fields, so numbers do not add up to 74.

Funding arrangements - overview

The most common arrangement for financing the organisations, and thereby directly or indirectly financing the international sectoral initiatives, are *assessment or certification fees* (mentioned by 40 of the 74 organisations covered in this study) followed by, *membership fees* used by 38 of the organisations. Another common type of financing is *licensing or accreditation fees*, used by 12 organisations, and *charging course tuition fees*, mentioned by 11 organisations.

Six organisations additionally mention *registration or administration fees*. Fewer organisations (5) generate additional income by *selling learning materials* such as textbooks, and an additional 5 partly rely on receiving donations from individuals or companies (sponsorship). Individual *other* financing arrangements include: receiving a share of the training/tuition fees from training providers, organising an annual trade

show, advertising awards, charging broadcasting fees, having implemented a transfer system for players or receiving financial support from another international organisation.

30 organisations indicated that they received *EU funding* at least at some point during the initiative's development, with Leonardo da Vinci or LLP grants being the most common EU project funding in this sample. In a few cases, other funding streams are mentioned (e.g. the initial development of the European Computer Driving Licence was financed by the European Commission through the ESPRIT research programme, that aimed to examine how to raise the levels of digital literacy throughout Europe).

Most respondents did not specify the stage of development which was co-financed by EU funds. For frameworks, it was usually the initial phase of development which was co-funded, whereas implementation – if realised at all – and further development were usually financed by other means, such those mentioned above (e.g. membership fees). For initiatives dealing with the development of qualifications, these were, in some cases, follow-up projects of previous projects that developed a framework, going into more detail and including implementation. An example would be the Aspire2Create project, which in its initial stage developed a competence framework and in the follow-up project developed a qualification. Other initiatives, such as the European Care Certificate (ECC) funded three stages of development through three consecutive EU-funded projects.

Regarding sustainability of EU funded projects, there seem to be both successful and less successful initiatives. Some organisations, such as the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers, successfully implemented numerous consecutive EU-financed projects and their qualifications are already in use. Other initiatives, such as the European e-Competence Framework (e-cf), were initiated by well-established and recognised European organisations and were able to independently find the financial means to continue the development and implementation. Others, especially initiatives based on heterogeneous project teams consisting of various small organisations with different focus points (e.g. the certi.mentu initiative, the AgroFe-project on trainings and certifications in agro-forestry, or DEKRA's Logistics Qualification Framework), often lacked either the financial means to independently advance the initiative or the mutual willingness to continue. Typical for these initiatives is the fact that they were not able to include important stakeholders, who would have enough self-interest to engage in the further development.

Regarding national funding, no explicit references were made. However, two international membership organisations stated that they are financed through membership or licence fees which have to be paid by national social partners or national member societies, respectively. Furthermore, all recipients of EU funding for projects referred to a co-financing (of usually 25%), but did often not specify where these funds came from. In few cases respondents stated that the wages of the employees dealing with the EU-funded projects made up the co-financing part from the side of the participating organisations. In some cases it can be assumed that these organisations also receive national funding (e.g. universities). One respondent referred to the possibility of national funding for accredited testing centres in the UK.

Funding arrangements by type of initiatives

The following table describes funding arrangements according to the type of initiative, in order to visualise differences between initiatives and their type of funding. Some initiatives refer to more than one type, thus the total number of types listed here is higher than 84.

Table 3.   Funding arrangements by type of initiative

Funding arrangements	ISQ(s)	Suite of ISQs	International Standards	ISQF	ISCF	Total
membership fees	3	19	10	3	4	39
assessment or certification fees	8	24	3	1	4	40
course tuition fees	1	8	1	0	1	11
licensing or accreditation fees	3	6	2	0	1	12
registration or administration fees	3	2	1	0	0	6
selling learning materials	0	4	0	0	0	4
donations from individuals or companies (sponsorship)	0	5	0	0	0	5
Other	1	3	0	0	0	4
EU funding	6	9	7	7	6	35
Total number of initiatives	**12**	**39**	**9**	**8**	**16**	**84**

Source: Interviews and desk research

Regarding the type of initiative, the development of ISQF and ISCF seem to rely more on EU funding: more than 75% of the 17 covered have received EU funds at some point of development, compared to 24 – 50 % of other types of initiatives. The initiatives relying distinctively less on EU funding are suites of international sectoral qualifications. This is not surprising since this type is also the one that is most frequently encountered at international level, as presented in section 4.2.

Reversely, the most common means of financing ISQs, suites of international sectoral qualifications and international standards are membership and assessment/certification fees. Membership fees play the biggest role for standards, with more than 75 % of initiatives making use of them, while assessment and certification fees are the most important source of funding for suites of ISQs (almost 60 % use them). However, more than half of the framework-related initiatives also charge membership fees and/or assessment/certification fees.

Funding arrangements by type of organisation

Funding arrangements might also differ according to the type of organisation in charge of managing the initiative. The table below shows the differences between the following types of organizations:

A) Membership body comprising national sectoral/professional bodies

B) Membership body comprising companies/individual professionals

C) International education centre

D) International institution

E) not-for-profit organisation that does not fit into the above categories

F) A private commercial entity mainly delivering qualifications and training

G) A private commercial entity for which training is a secondary activity

H) Other (mainly referring to EU project groups with no clear management structure)

Table 4.   Funding arrangements by type of organisation (multiple answers)

Funding arrangements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
membership fees	20	13	0	0	0	0	0	1
assessment or certification fees	8	12	1	1	4	3	2	3
course tuition fees	1	3	0	0	3	2	0	1
licensing or accreditation fees	6	2	0	0	2	0	0	1
registration or administration fees	6	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
selling learning materials	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
donations from individuals or companies (sponsorship)	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Other	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
EU funding	13	1	0	0	1	3	0	9
Total number of organisations	**30**	**20**	**1**	**1**	**5**	**5**	**2**	**10**

Source: Interviews and desk research

Membership fees are the most popular source of financing for membership bodies comprising national sectoral/professional bodies as well as initiatives managed by membership bodies comprising companies and individual professionals. The big difference among these two types of organisations is their approach to EU funding: while 45 % of initiatives managed by membership bodies comprising national sectoral bodies have received EU funding at some point, hardly any of the membership bodies comprising companies and individual professionals have done so.

Not-for-profit organisations, as well as private commercial entities delivering qualification and training, finance their initiatives by charging assessment or certification fees and tuition fees. The biggest difference between the two types of organisation is that the commercial entities, according to the small sample, make more use of EU funding opportunities, whereas not-for-profit organisations use licensing, accreditation or registration and administration fees to finance their

initiatives, and receive donations or sponsoring more often than other types of organisations.

The two 'private commercial entities for which training is a secondary activity' refer to the big software providers Microsoft and Cisco, which also provide certification, in cooperation with the international examination provider Pearson VUE, and finance their certification and training activities mainly through certification fees.

The initiatives which did not fall under any of the above-mentioned categories can be summarised as consisting of EU projects with international project partner teams. Almost all of the initiatives in this category were financed by EU funding, additionally making use of assessment or certification fees and to a lesser extent also tuition fees or donations.

The responses for international education centres and international institutions were too small to draw conclusions. However, in this sample they were financed through assessment and certification fees.

6   Relationship with NQFs and EQF

Main findings

- Only few NQFs are currently open for including ISQ. Available data suggests that nine countries currently have a national procedure in place (or under development) for this.

- Nevertheless, fourteen initiatives for which interviews were carried out were stated as to be directly linked to an NQF and fourteen were indirectly related to an NQF. However, in several cases this linkage was not validated by EQG NCPs.

- The expected improvement in the recognition of qualifications or specific professions in national contexts is one of the main reasons for seeking inclusion into NQFs.

- Thirty-nine organisations (responsible for 39 initiatives) stated that their initiatives are linked to the EQF.

- The most often mentioned reason for having or wanting to create a link with the EQF is to improve recognition. Approximately one-third of interviewees indicated the improvement of transferability of qualifications and mobility of workforce as reason for linking (or wishing to link) to the EQF.

6.1   Openness of NQFs to including international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives

At the beginning of 2015, the European Commission commissioned a survey (online questionnaire) in order to gather information about national procedures (existing or under development) for aligning International Sectoral Qualifications (ISQ) to National Qualifications Frameworks.

The results of this survey were complemented and updated, within the framework of the present study, through an e-mail survey among EQF NCPs (carried out in March 2016), requesting them to provide feedback on the openness of their NQFs towards ISQs and ISQFs, and whether they have been approached by any bodies governing these initiatives for linking them to their NQF. The response rate by the EQF NCPs to this e-mail survey was very high, with a total number of 30 NCPs (out of 37 contacted) providing a reply by e-mail.[39]

The responses from the e-mail survey broadly confirmed the results of the 2015 survey, with only minor variations (which are outlined below). Results confirm that there is generally a very low level of activity concerning both the linking of ISQs to NQFs, and the linking of other initiatives to the NQF, with a relatively small number of countries reporting on any specific activity. Sector demand for linking to NQFs seems to be limited, with most countries declaring that they have not been approached by organisations wishing to link this type of qualifications or frameworks to their NQF. Only Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Lithuania were able to name specific organisations, which have approached them for a possible linking of their qualifications to their NQF.

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[39] Austria, Belgium-nl, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.

There is currently no evidence of any international sectoral qualifications *frameworks* being linked to a National Qualifications Framework. Only Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia specifically reported that they consider it technically/theoretically possible to link ISQF to their NQF, but that this has not been carried out yet.[40]

Available data suggests that nine countries currently have a national procedure in place (or under development) for including international sectoral *qualifications* in their National Qualifications Frameworks: BG, BIH[41], FR, LT[42], NL, PT, SI, SK, UK-EWNI, UK-SC. Compared to the 2015 survey, there have been two significant changes. In Ireland, the inclusion of ISQs into the NQF had to be put on hold for legal reasons. In Slovenia, the recent adoption of the NQF law has made it technically possible to include ISQs into the NQF (the law specifies procedures for the inclusion of 'supplementary qualifications' into the NQF, without however explicitly referring to ISQs).

There is confirmation from 22 countries (AT, BE-fr, BE-nl, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, HR, HU, IT, LI, LU, LV, ME, MT, NO, PL, RO, SE, TR) that there is no national procedure in place or under development for the inclusion of ISQs. Responses from the 2015 survey suggest that the main reasons for the fact that no national procedure for including ISQs is in place relate to the level of progress of NQF implementation or the scope of the framework. The following factors were mentioned as potential contributors to making the inclusion of ISQ an issue at national level: discussion on the inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NQF; increased pressure/interest on the part of providers; respective developments at EU; experience from other countries; a more cohesive approach at European level to the assessment of ISQs.

6.2   Number of initiatives linked to an NQF

The study explored the extent to which initiatives identified were already linked to an NQF. Several interviewees stated that they do not collect information on links to NQFs systematically and were therefore not able to provide exact data. In some cases, only examples of countries where there is a link with the NQF were mentioned. Furthermore, the information provided by the interviewees was in many cases not validated by NCPs. Thus, the information presented in the tables below is most probably not complete and needs to be read with cautiousness.

A total of 26 organisations have reported to have linked their initiatives to an NQF. Two types of linkage were identified:

- Direct link to an NQF: international sectoral qualifications are included in an NQF;
- Indirect link to an NQF: qualifications that are based on international sectoral standards or frameworks or that integrate international sectoral qualifications are included in NQFs in some countries.

Fourteen initiatives for which interviews were carried out were stated as being directly linked to an NQF and fourteen were indirectly related to an NQF. Note, in a few cases, interviewees stated that their qualifications were linked to an NQF for countries where the NQF is not yet adopted or fully operational (Austria, Finland, Italy, Spain) – as a result, these have been excluded from the table. In such cases it could be that they considered that the qualifications are formal qualifications in a given country and will be linked to the NQF once adopted.

Some interviewees also reported that their qualifications were linked to some NQFs, such as Malta, where there is no formal process for linking ISQs to NQFs. For these

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[40] Quite many of the countries referred this question to the linking of qualifications only, instead of systems or frameworks.

[41] BIH stated that is was under development.

[42] LT stated that it was under development.

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initiatives, it may be that the initiative is well-established in the country and consequently has been classed as a national professional qualification.

Table 5.   Initiatives with a direct link to an NQF

Type	Number of initiatives	NQF concerned	Managing organisation and NQF
ISQ(s)	1	UK	European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (**UK**)
Suite of ISQs	13	MT, IE, NL, PT, UK-England, UK-Scotland, Australia, Singapore, Iran, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (**IE, UK-England, UK-Scotland, MT, South Africa**)
			Cambridge English Language Assessment (**UK**)
			Confederation of International Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology (**MT, UK**)
			ECDL Foundation (**UK-England, UK-Scotland, MT, IE, Singapore, Iran, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam**)
			EuroAspire & Aspire2Create (**UK-Scotland**)
			European Federation for Welding, Joining and Cutting (**NL, PT, UK**)
			Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (**UK**)
			Institute of Brewing & Distilling (**UK**)
			International Association of Book-keepers (**UK**)
			International Council on Systems Engineering (**UK, Australia**)
			Microsoft (**IE, UK-Scotland, Australia**)
			Pearson (**UK**)
			Royal Yachting Association (**UK**)

Source: Interviews

Table 6.   Initiatives which are indirectly linked to an NQF

Type	Number of initiatives	NQF concerned	Managing organisation and NQF
ISQ(s)	1	DE, DK	European Railway Agency (**DE, DK, IT**)
Suite of ISQs	2	DE, TK	International Council on Systems Engineering (**DE**)
			Eco-C European communication certificate (**TK**)
ISQF	3	IE, NL, UK, UK-Scotland	European Banking & Financial Services Training Association (**UK-Scotland**)
			European Marketing Confederation (**UK, NL**)
			EuropeActive (**IE, NL, UK**)
ISCF	4	PT, NL PL	European e-competence framework (**NL**)

|			
		South Africa	Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (**South Africa**)
			European Federation of Nurses (**n/a**)
			International Council for Coaching Excellence (**PL, PT**)
International Standards	3	DK, NO, IE, PT, NL, BEfl	Coiffure EU (**DK, NO**)
			European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (**IE, PT, NL, BEfl**)
			European Federation of Radiographer Societies (**n/a)**

Source: Interviews

The question about links with NQFs was also asked during the online survey and a similar trend was found. Around one third of organisations that answered and who managed a relevant initiative stated that their initiatives are included in at least one NQF (30 out of 81).

The organisations surveyed were also asked about their interest in linking with an NQF. In total 52 organisations (nearly two thirds of respondents – n=81) have shown some interest in including their qualifications in an NQF.

Most of the initiatives reported by interviewees as linked to an NQF are managed by a membership based body that has national sectoral bodies and professional organisations as members (n=10) which is coherent with the overall figure shown in section 5.1.

As shown in figure 10, the NQF with the most links is the UK qualifications framework (n=12). It should be noted that not all interviewees clearly differentiated between England and Scottish frameworks, for these cases we used the general label 'UK', while when this information was available we kept the distinction. The following 'most linked' NQFs are the Irish, Dutch and Scottish ones (n=5).

Figure 10. National qualifications frameworks initiatives identified refer to
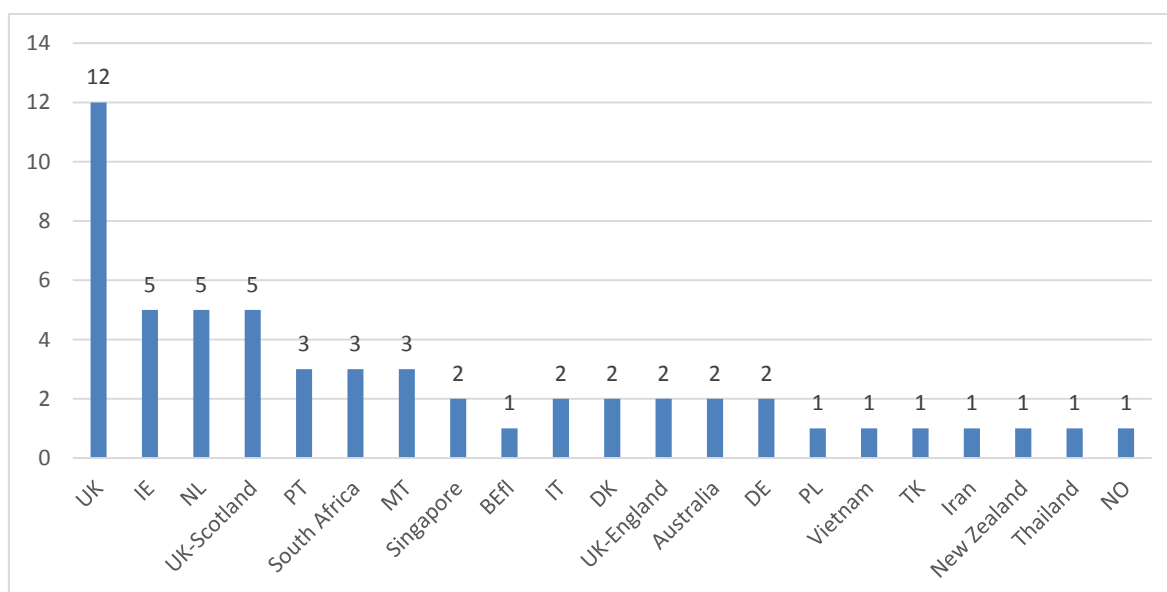
Source: Interviews. Several non-European NQFs have also been mentioned: South Africa (n=3), Singapore (2), Australia (n=2), Vietnam (n=1), Iran (n=1), New Zealand (n=1), and Thailand (n=1).

As presented in section 6.1, very few NQFs are open for including international sectoral qualifications. Thus, there are rather few initiatives that are included in an NQF except for international sectoral standards or ISQs that are integrated in national qualifications allocated to NQF levels. That the UK qualifications framework was mentioned most often in this context can probably be explained by the fact that several of the international organisations responsible for initiatives linked to the UK framework are based in the UK. In some cases, the international qualifications were developed based on UK qualifications.

6.4   Reasons for linking to an NQF

The reasons for linking or not-linking of initiatives to an NQF as well as the experiences made so far are presented in the following paragraphs.

Reasons for linking (or wanting to link) to an NQF

The expected *improvement of the recognition of qualifications or specific professions in national contexts* is one of the main reasons for seeking inclusion into NQFs. The benefits associated with this include:

- The inclusion in the NQF can provide clarity on equivalency of ISQs with other qualifications in a country and thus enhance their standing in the national context;

- It is considered as a means for improving opportunities for holders of ISQs in terms of progression in the education and training system or positions at the labour market;

- Improved recognition is expected to increase demand for the ISQ and to encourage providers including programmes for achieving ISQ in their training offers;

- Enhanced recognition through inclusion in an NQF would also provide access to public funding for learners aiming at achieving the respective ISQ.

Some organisations explicitly state that they see an added value in *displaying the NQF level on their qualifications* for signalling the quality of the ISQ whereas other organisations display the inclusion in NQFs because they are interested in having EQF levels assigned and thus signalling the 'European' dimension of their qualifications.

Organisations that are operating also outside Europe consider the inclusion in a European NQF as opportunity to improve the value of a qualification at the international level. For example, one interviewee stated that the reference to the EQF has a very good reputation in Asia and the Arab world.

Reasons for not linking (or not wanting to link) to an NQF

During the survey, organisations were also asked about reasons for not linking to an NQF. Of the 48 organisations whose qualifications are not referenced to any NQF, around half of the organisations (n=25) have never attempted to do so. However, of the remainder, 13 reported difficulties, such as not being able to include all their qualifications or being told that it was not possible to link their initiative.[43]

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[43] In order to verify potential bias due to organisations not based in the EU, responses were also analysed excluding those surveys filled by respondents placed outside the EU. However, percentages did not change significantly.

Figure 11. Reasons why international qualifications are not included in any NQF

Why are your international qualifications not included in any National Qualifications Framework(s)? (N=47)

- We asked for inclusion, the file is still open (n=10)
- We tried and some qualifications were included, but not all (n=7)
- We tried but it was not possible to include them (n=5)
- We have never tried to include them into national qualifications frameworks (n=25)
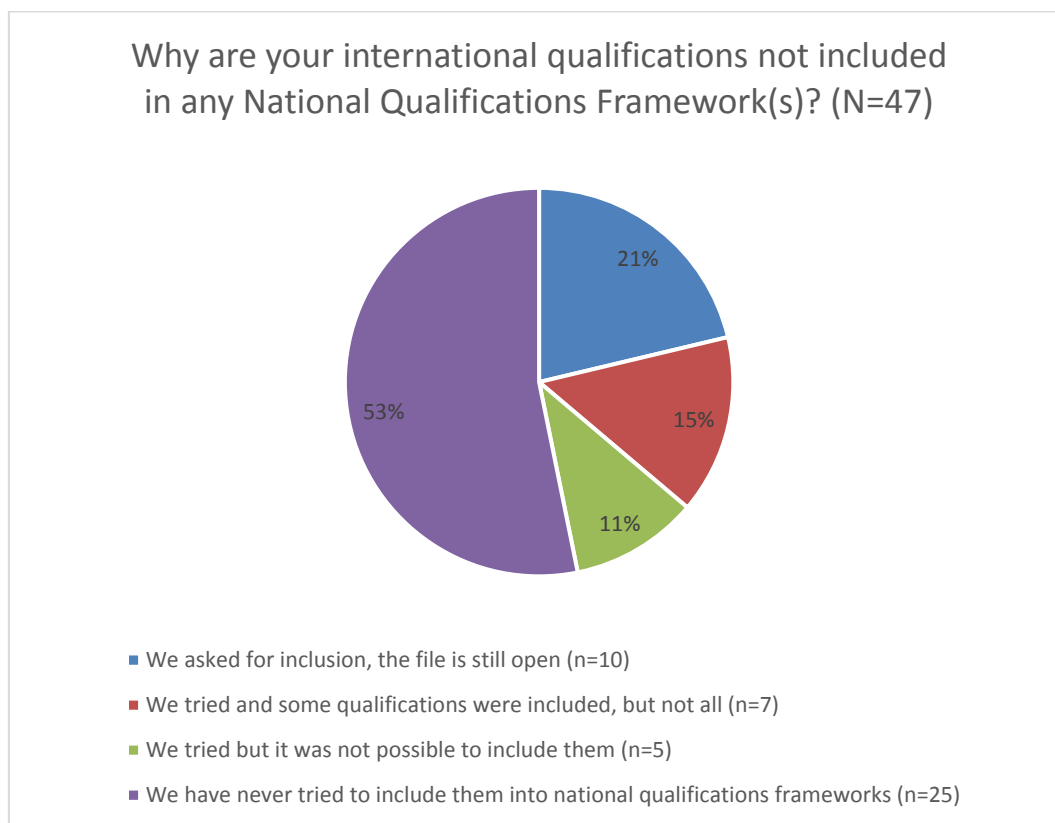
Source: ICF survey of international sectoral organisations

During the interviews the following reasons for not linking or not wanting to link the initiatives to an NQF were discussed:

- Some organisations state that their ISQ are not recognised or accredited by national authorities although they are recognised by the industry. Their explanation is that the qualifications they offer are delivered outside the formal education system or do not fit the education sector; thus, they conclude that they also do not fit into the NQF. Organisations responsible for ISQFs or ISCFs often do not see any chances for including these frameworks into an NQF because in most countries this is not possible anyway as only qualifications are linked to the NQF.[44]

- Other organisations do not see any added value or benefits for linking their initiatives to NQFs. This is the case, for example, because:

  - The ISQ is already widely recognised in the occupational context;

  - Public funding streams have dried up in the recent years and thus there are no perceived benefits anymore (before, having a qualification recognised could benefit a training centre as recognised qualifications would allow them to have access to funding streams);

A few organisations even see disadvantages in linking their ISQ to an NQF:

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[44] There are only few cases of National Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks linked to NQFs; for example, according to the Maltese EQF referencing report, the Malta Printing Industry Association (MPIA) has established occupational standards for their sector as well as a sectoral qualifications framework which is aligned to the MQF.

- Inclusion in an NQF might mean that the syllabi would be made publicly available and the organisation responsible for the ISQ would also lose control of the ISQ.

- Inclusion in an NQF might require changes in the ISQ and the standard for training and assessment what might deteriorate its quality. Furthermore, changing the content or profile of a qualification in order to meet specific NQF inclusion criteria is not feasible for an ISQ which is expected to be the same wherever it is offered.

- Inclusion in an NQF does not benefit the European or international dimension of the initiative and might therefore even be counterproductive in this sense.

Other reasons for no activities in this regard are lack of time and contacts to get involved and that an organisation is too young or the initiative is not mature enough.

Perception of the process

Only in two cases when organisations highlighted positive experiences in linking ISQs to an NQF. In one case, the NQF authority was described as very interested and cooperative. In another case, the organisation initiating the linkage to an NQF was experienced with the procedure and therefore described the process as rather smooth.

Several comments referred to negative experiences. The procedures are perceived as time consuming and burdensome, and the process of negotiation with national authorities on the inclusion of ISQs into NQFs is also considered as rather slow. NQF authorities in different countries (EU Member States as well as third countries) have different regulations and criteria for including qualifications into their NQF. These requirements would need to be studied and applied and it could be quite complicated to meet them all. Furthermore, language barriers might be faced if all documentation was required in national languages.

6.5   Relationship with the EQF

The majority of interviewees has shown a good level of understanding of the EQF (n=40). Deeper knowledge was shown by interviewees from organisations targeting mostly the European market. However, the level of awareness identified in the study is likely to be artificially high as organisations are more likely to respond to the survey if they were aware of the EQF.

Figure 12. Level of awareness of the EQF demonstrated by interviewees
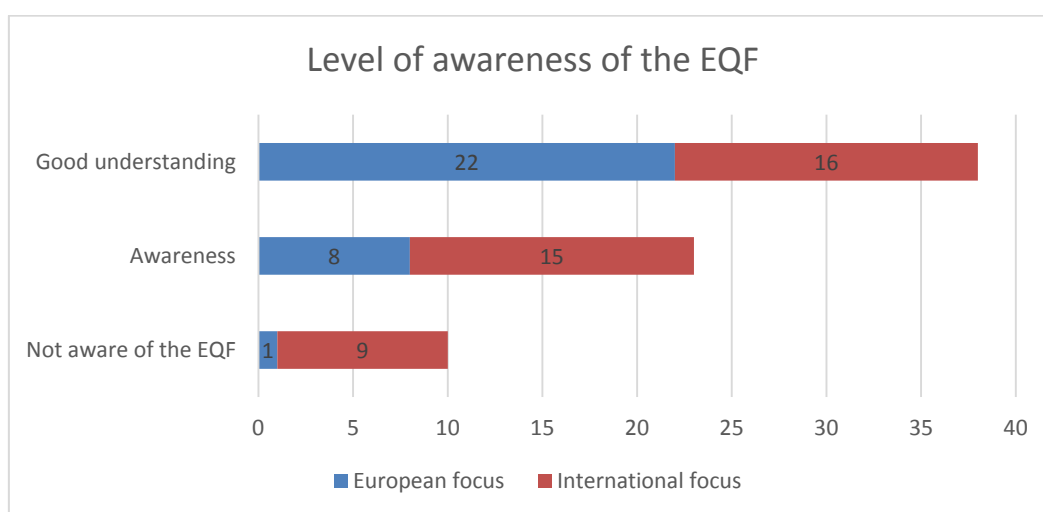
Source: Interviews

Through the survey, respondents were asked about their intentions with regard to displaying EQF levels in their qualifications or frameworks. Half of respondents (46)

confirmed that their organisations are considering displaying EQF level on qualification documentation.

Interviewees were asked (and this was verified through desk research) whether initiatives analysed were already referring to EQF levels. Thirty-nine organisations (responsible for 39 initiatives) stated that this was the case. In 13 cases such links are being displayed without any existing linkage with an NQF.

Currently, there are no 'officially recognised' procedures for directly linking the initiatives analysed in this study to the EQF. It is only possible to link them to the EQF via inclusion in one or more NQFs as presented above (see Section 6.2). However, several initiatives also refer directly to the EQF. This 'soft linkage' (informational, self-ascribed) means that the organisation concerned uses the EQF levels, principles and methodology and claims a certain EQF link without any form of 'verification' at the European level. Many companies and sector organisations are already using the EQF to locate and contextualise the qualifications or frameworks they provide, using the EQF as a reference point. Several EU-funded projects have also taken this approach.

Frameworks that refer to the EQF can be distinguished according to the closeness of their design features –particularly the level descriptors – with those of the EQF.[45]

- Some ISQF can be understood 'sectoral interpretations or translations of the EQF', such as the SQF for the fitness sector or the EFICERT SQF for the insurance industry. They are clearly based on the structure of the EQF while substituting the latter's level descriptors with detailed statements that apply more specifically to the sector.

- Other frameworks have originally been developed independently of the EQF and aligned to EQF at a later stage. An example is the European e-Competence Framework (e-CF) for information and communications technology which was developed independently to meet industry needs and expectations. The e-CF version 1.0 was published in 2008 but has been revised several times since then. The relativity between the EQF levels and e-CF competence levels has been systematically developed to enable consistent interpretation of the EQF in the ICT workplace environment.

Table 7 below shows that 18 initiatives were referring to the EQF levels, via their existing NQF linkage (as reported by interviewees), 8 initiatives used a combined approach (via the NQF but also a direct reference) and 13 referred to the EQF directly, without any reference to an NQF.

Table 7.   Number of initiatives linked to the EQF and approach applied

Type of initiative	Mixed approach	Only through NQF	Only directly to EQF
ISQ(s)	0	2	0
Suite of ISQs	3	11	5
ISQF	2	0	3
ISCF	2	2	3
International Standards	1	3	2
Total	**8**	**18**	**13**

Source: Interviews

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[45] Lester, S. (2015). The European Qualifications Framework: a technical critique. In: Research in Post-compulsory Education 20 (2), 159-172 (2015)

Figure 13 below shows the level of maturity of initiatives linked to NQFs and the EQF. The figure also distinguishes between initiatives that received EU funding. It is interesting to note that among those initiatives that haven't received EU funding, the link with NQF and EQF (as reported by the interviewees) can be mostly found in well-established initiatives (thirteen linked to NQF and fourteen to EQF against two in more recent experiences). EU funding, on the contrary, seems to have played an accelerator role allowing more recent initiatives to be linked to the EQF and to NQFs.

Figure 13. Level of maturity of initiatives and link with NQF and EQF
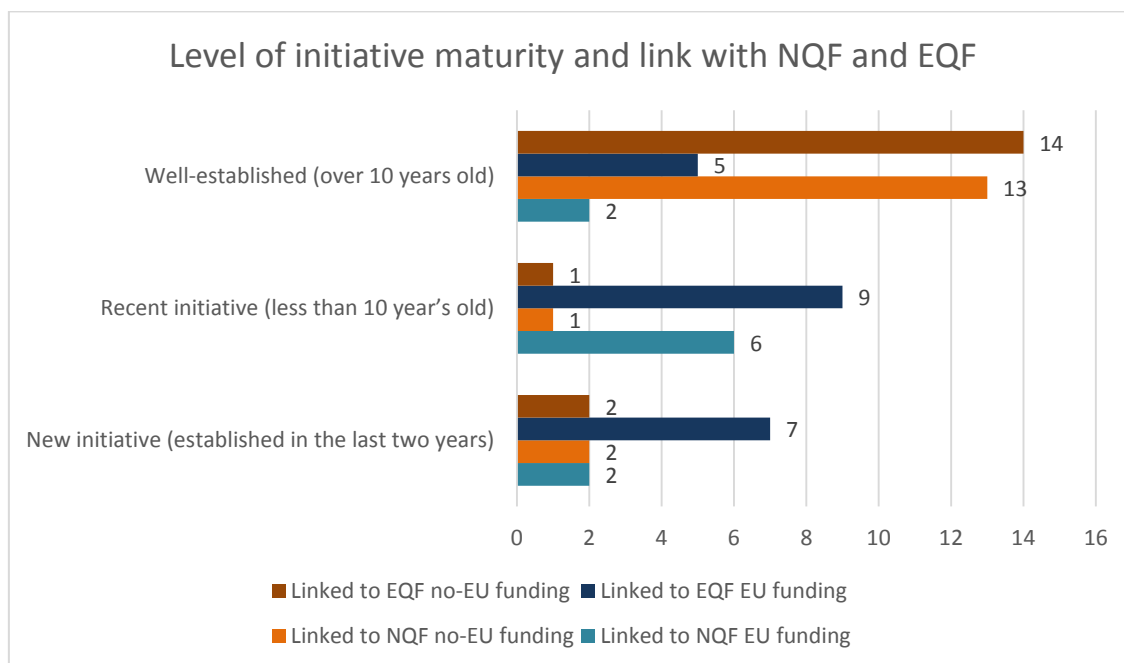
Source: Interviews

Reasons for creating or wanting to create a link with the EQF

The most often mentioned reason for having or wanting to create a link with the EQF is to *improve recognition*. About half of the organisations interviewed referred to various aspects of recognition:

- Recognition of the profession: Some organisations emphasise that the benefit of a linkage to the EQF would lead to a broader recognition of the respective profession (e.g. coaching, family therapy).

- Recognition at European level: Some of the initiatives are already well known in some countries and the linkage to the EQF is expected to enhance recognition at the European level and to support roll out in all European countries. This EQF linkage would also put international organisations who want to spread their initiatives in a better 'selling' position

- Recognition outside Europe: A few organisations that are operating in the international context expect that a linkage to the EQF would support a better recognition in countries outside Europe where the EQF might be better known as individual NQFs.

- Recognition on the labour market: Linking to the EQF is expected to enhance the value of qualifications in the labour market and the recognition by employers. Employers would thus be more interested in these qualifications and holders of these qualifications might have better employment prospects.

- Recognition in education and training systems: It is also expected that the chances for the recognition of educational programmes (often offered in non-formal learning contexts) in national systems might be better when the

qualifications they are leading to are linked to the EQF. Moreover, it might become easier for these programmes to receive public funding.

Approximately one-third of interviewees indicated the *improvement of transferability of qualifications and mobility of workforce* as reason for linking (or wishing to link) to the EQF. Holders of the qualifications would be enabled to move and find employment possibilities across Europe or even worldwide because they were better able to demonstrate their level of achievement.

Other reasons were mentioned less often. They include:

- *Trust, credibility and visibility*: In some cases, interviewees were less specific and stated that the linkage with the EQF is expected to support trust and would improve the general credibility and visibility of their initiatives.

- *Transparency and comparability*: The function of the EQF as translation tool was emphasised by some interviewees. Thus, the linkage to the EQF is expected to support the understanding across countries and increase the comparability of programmes and qualifications and to enable a better link to national qualifications.

- *Standardization, harmonisation and consistency*: The benefits of a direct link to the EQF include enhanced standardisation of qualification profiles and consistent levelling of an ISQ across countries as well as harmonisation of certification schemes.

- *Quality*: Since the EQF-linkage would require quality assurance standards, it would also put stronger emphasis on quality assurance of these international initiatives and the bodies providing or awarding ISQs.

Some interviewees stated that a linkage to the EQF *might be more interesting in the future*: For example, they consider the EQF as not well known or not mature enough and thus a linkage would not be very useful at the moment. In another case, it was mentioned that the respective ISQ was already recognised by the market and linkage to the EQF would not bring any added value in the short term. However, as the EQF becomes better known and used, linkage to the EQF will become increasingly relevant. Another reason for not seeing any immediate value of linking to the EQF is the introduction of other tools that are supposed to support the mobility of workers across the EU, such as the European Professional Card for some regulated professions[46].

6.6   Main trends and implications

There is relatively high awareness of the EQF and NQFs among interviewees. This is perhaps unsurprising given that a high proportion are European professional/sectoral bodies, which are likely to be interested in national and European skills policies and developments.

The majority of interviewees stated that they wanted to have their initiatives included in one or more NQFs and linked to the EQF. Some interviewees see a higher benefit in including their initiative in NQFs in order to gain wider national recognition of their initiatives because they perceive an NQF level to have greater currency in a national market than an EQF level. However, most organisations would prefer a direct linkage to the EQF in order to emphasise the transnational dimension, to ensure better recognition across Europe as well as internationally and to support mobility of holders of their qualifications. Whereas some interviewees also pointed to disadvantages

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[46] nurses responsible for general care, pharmacists, physiotherapists, mountain guides, a real estate agents - http://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/policy/european-professional-card/index_en.htm

related to the inclusion in NQFs, this was not the case in relation to the linkage to the EQF.

Since only few initiatives covered by this study seem to be included in NQFs, no general observations can be made in terms of type of organisation that is more likely to achieve NQF inclusion. However, it can be observed that about half of these organisations are membership based bodies that have *individual* professionals and companies as members. No focus on a specific sector can be identified. Also, in comparison to the overall numbers, an equal share of approximately one-third of initiatives of each category of maturity is has a link to an NQF. Thus, there seem to be no big differences according to the maturity of initiatives.

7 Use of learning outcomes and quality assurance

Main findings

- Learning outcomes are commonly used to describe international sectoral qualifications. They are commonly used to describe the course objectives and define the assessment

- The learning outcomes approach is less commonly used for level descriptors. However, when organisations do not use learning outcome level descriptors, some review the learning outcomes of a qualification to decide what the level it should be placed on in the framework. This indicates an indirect use of learning outcomes to define qualification levels.

- Where examples were provided, the structure of the learning outcomes were all relatively similar. They were generally short, one sentence descriptors, that are broadly of good quality.

- Most organisations stated that they had explicit quality assurance processes in place. However, when probed the processes that were employed varied considerably. Some organisations had extensive systems in place, which included reviewing course content, inspecting provider premises and examining the experience and skills of teachers. Other organisations employed less detailed approaches.

7.1 Use of learning outcomes

This section describes how learning outcomes are used and structured in the initiatives analysed. Moreover, the section also presents information on how the learning outcomes were developed and updated.

7.1.1 Use of learning outcomes for qualifications and standards

The research found that learning outcomes were commonly used to define international sectoral qualifications and standards. Nearly all interviewed organisations reported using learning outcomes and some also provided examples of the learning outcomes they use. The use of learning outcomes was common among all types of organisations.

Organisations reported the main reasons for using learning outcomes was to:

- Demonstrate learner achievement (reported by 43 out of 74 respondents)

- Define training standards (reported by 44 respondents)

- Define assessments (reported by 41 respondents).

The variation in how learning outcomes are used was primarily due to the differing roles that organisations play in the delivery of ISQs. Organisations that provided the qualification assessment but did not deliver the qualifications mainly used learning outcomes for assessment. When organisations primarily delivered the training, it was used to define training standards. If the qualifications were used to define professional standards, then the learning outcomes were used to define learner achievement.

Overall, nearly all organisations were able to demonstrate a specific purpose for using learning outcomes. This suggests that they are not just used as qualification descriptors but are also being practically applied to support the delivery and assessment of training.

7.1.2 Use of learning outcomes for frameworks

Around half of organisations managing frameworks reported using learning outcomes to define the levels of frameworks. In these organisations, each level indicated the level of autonomy in which individuals could conduct a task. For example, in level 1 individuals are able to assist with work, in level 2 they able to work with little supervision, and in level 3 they can conduct tasks without any direction.

When organisations do not use learning outcome level descriptors, some review the learning outcomes of a qualification to decide what the level it should be placed on in the framework. This is mainly an informal matching process rather than based on a consistent set of criteria.

Nearly all organisations managing frameworks required qualifications to be defined in learning outcomes. Most organisations insist on learning outcomes to be used in both the curricula and the assessment of qualifications. Organisations generally believed the learning outcomes approach was the most effective measure for defining qualifications.

7.1.3 The format of learning outcomes

Where examples of learning outcomes were available, the study found that most organisations used short, one sentence learning outcomes. They generally start with a verb that describes the operation that students are expected to undertake (e.g. define, implement, understand, be able to) and the subject to be affected (e.g. treatment plan, programme, action plans, reports). Some learning outcomes also contain quality standards (well-structured, appropriate, high-quality, etc).

Box 9 – Example of learning outcomes used in ISQs

ACCA Accountancy qualification – Business Analysis unit

On successful completion of this paper, candidates should be able to:

A Assess the strategic position of an organisation

B Evaluate the strategic choices available to an organisation

C Discuss how an organisation might go about its strategic implementation

D Evaluate and redesign business processes and structures to implement and support the organisation's strategy, taking account of customer and other major stakeholder requirements

EN 14153-1 / ISO 24801-1 - LEVEL 1 "Supervised Diver"

A scuba diver at level 1 "Supervised Diver" shall be trained to have sufficient knowledge, skill and experience to dive in open water under the direct supervision of a dive leader.

Scuba divers at level 1 "Supervised Diver" are qualified to dive within the following parameters accompanied by a dive leader:

dive to a recommended maximum depth of 12 m under the direct supervision of a dive leader,

dive in groups of up to four level 1 scuba divers per dive leader provided the dive leader is capable of establishing physical contact with all level 1 scuba divers at any point during the dive,

make dives which do not require in-water decompression stops,

dive only when appropriate support is available at the surface,

dive under conditions that are equal or better than the conditions where they were trained.

If accompanied by a scuba instructor, a scuba diver at level 1 may gain progressive experience beyond these parameters and develop competency in managing more challenging diving conditions designed to lead to higher qualifications.

Certified IT Architect certificate

"By the end of this module, participants will have the knowledge and ability to:

A Manage architecture service teams assignments and responsibilities with future project and programs

B Measure the value of a technology investment decision using multiple tools and techniques

C Research, select and apply an architecture framework to their organization

D Be able to model, analyse, and reason about structural and financial aspects of a business

E Understand basic financial operation, including accounting for business

An important part of learning outcome descriptions reviewed refers to work tasks of professionals. They capture the tasks that a person should be capable of performing.

The learning outcomes generally cover knowledge, skills and competence, but relatively few providers disaggregate learning outcomes into these three categories. In most cases, learning outcomes were presented holistically. However, they were

commonly broken up into topics or units, which broadly reflected the structure of the qualification.

In most qualifications, the learning outcomes included a good mix of knowledge, skills and competency descriptors. However, in a few qualifications, the learning outcomes were primarily centred on competencies. These qualifications were generally in practical occupations (such as sports coaching, diving instructors, etc.). Two organisations also reported only having learning outcomes related to knowledge; skills and competencies were deemed to be too difficult to assess.

The learning outcomes were generally quite detailed. This is likely to be because they were often used to develop exams and consequently needed to be comprehensive. They were also generally 'technology neutral', which is likely to be to ensure they could be applied to different employers and different countries.

7.2   How are learning outcomes defined and updated

7.2.1 Development of learning outcomes

Most organisations employed a structured approach to developing learning outcomes. This most commonly included:

- Primary research with employers/professionals. This is done through surveys and qualitative research. Some organisations consult with their membership base, but most also interview a broader range of employers and industry associations. This was reported by 45 of the 55 organisations.

- Desk research. This primarily involves analysing job descriptions and personal specifications to map the common skills required by employees. Most organisations review a range of job descriptions from different sub-sectors. This was conducted by 37 of 55 organisations.

- Expert inputs from academics and experienced practitioners. A few organisations had a specific committee of experts responsible for developing learning outcomes. In some examples, experts' peer-review the findings from the desk review and primary research to ensure the findings were robust. This was reported by 10 of 55 organisations.

- Few organisations reported using specific guidance documents to define the learning outcomes. Those that did stated that they used Bologna guidance. Some organisations may however employ specialist writers to develop the learning outcomes. This was reported by 8 of 55 organisations.

- Educational institutions were rarely consulted during the development of learning outcomes. Only a few (3) organisations reported consulting with educational institutions, which were mainly HE institutions. The learning outcomes development process was generally employer and practitioner led.

7.3   Coverage of QA and QA processes

7.3.1 Existence of quality assurance processes

In total, 64 of the 74 interviewed organisations stated they had explicit quality assurance processes for international sectoral qualifications and frameworks in place. These cover the development of qualifications, frameworks and standards, the delivery of training and the assessment/certification process.

Most organisations believed it is important to have effective QA procedures in place, in order to ensure the learning outcomes are clear and reflect up-to-date workplace practice and technologies. This helps organisation build trust in the qualification, which in turn increases take up.

Some organisations also introduced QA procedures to maintain the quality of training, particularly when they do not deliver the training themselves. This provided a financial

benefit; if learners had a positive experience of their teaching they were more likely to recommend the qualification to others. However, it was also recognised that learners could suffer if the teaching does not adequately prepare them to undertake the examination.

7.3.2 The development of qualifications, standards and frameworks

Nearly all organisations had some quality assurance processes in placing for developing the initiatives that they manage. When organisations provided details on the QA systems they employed, the most common were:

- Inviting feedback on standards and qualifications from members. Nearly all membership bodies reported doing this to some extent. Around three-quarters employed formal consultation methods, such as surveys. For the remainder, the consultation was more ad hoc, drawing on member feedback from bilateral conversations, workshops and events.

- Having outputs peer-reviewed with experts in their organisation (such as the organisation board of by an expert sub-groups). Around a third of organisations stated they established a group of experts that were responsible for developing the technical specifications for their initiatives. This approach was particularly common among organisations working in specialist occupations, where a relatively small proportion of individuals have expert knowledge of the occupation or sub-sector.

- Conducting a formal consultation on new of revised standards and qualifications. Around a fifth of organisations, and over half that developed standards, reported that they consulted with employers outside their membership base to develop their initiatives. Most did so through an online consultation exercise.

- Inviting feedback from training providers and learners. This was conducted relatively rarely (reported by about 1 in 10 organisations). It was primarily conducted by professional awarding organisations that commercially provide qualifications to training providers.

Relatively few organisations reported engaging external bodies to provide scrutiny on decisions on learning outcomes and levelling. This lack of scrutiny makes it difficult for organisations to ensure decisions are robust and in line with other national or sectoral qualifications.

7.3.3 Quality assuring the delivery of training

Most organisations had some quality assurance procedures in place for ensuring the quality of training delivery. However, the processes varied significantly depending on whether the organisation delivered the qualifications themselves or whether they were delivered by other organisations.

When organisations delivered the qualifications themselves, over three-quarters of organisations developed forms and surveys to gather learner feedback. These were then incorporated in future revisions to the curriculum. A few (2-3 organisations) stated that they asked internal colleagues to conduct informal inspections, but very few were externally inspected or audited.

Overall, 43 of the 74 interviewed organisations stated they had an approved provider process that training providers must meet to deliver the initiative. This included nearly all of the organisations that did not deliver the training themselves. Of these organisations:

- Around three-quarters (30) reviewed the training materials of the provider, to ensure the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are appropriate. Only providers with approved training materials were allowed to deliver or link qualifications to their framework;

- Over half (25) required teachers or examiners to meet certain criteria deliver or accredit the training. In around a half of cases, training providers submitted the CVs of teachers that would be undertaking the training. This approach was particularly common among professional awarding organisations. In other cases, teachers or examiners had to undertake specific training or undertake a certification process, which is administered by the initiative owner.

- Around a quarter (11) stated they conducted a provider audit, where they reviewed provider training facilities and teaching materials. This was through site visits to identify whether a training provider has sufficient equipment or resources to deliver the training effectively. This was primarily conducted by organisations that only had a few 'approved' providers delivering the training.

In total, 8 organisations that did not have formal procedures in place to assure the quality of training. These organisations mostly conducted the assessment themselves and therefore had mechanisms in place to ensure that individuals achieved the right level of knowledge, skills and competence. However, some students may have negative experiences of their learning if there is no formal mechanisms in place to monitor quality.

7.3.4 Quality assuring assessments / certification processes

Nearly all organisations stated they had clear assessment and certification criteria, of which four-fifths were based on learning outcomes. In around half of initiatives, organisations also specified the length of the examination and the nature of the examination (whether coursework or exam based).

Most organisations with international sectoral qualifications conduct the assessment themselves. Consequently, there is an implicit link between the qualification learning outcomes and the assessment. Some organisations stated that this was the main motivation for conducting the assessments.

Where organisations did not do the assessments, most provide assessment criteria and guidelines on the length and structure of the exams. Those that did not believed the accreditation of the training provider was sufficient to guarantee high quality assessments.

7.4 Implications and main trends

The vast majority of interviewed organisations stated that they described their initiatives in terms of learning outcomes. There was also good awareness and support for the concept of learning outcomes.

It was originally expected that the structure and quality of the learning outcomes would vary, depending on the nature of the initiative. However, the study found that the learning outcomes were generally of good quality and in a consistent structure. This was despite most organisations developing their learning outcomes internally with little expert support or scrutiny.

The learning outcomes used in international sectoral qualifications and frameworks are reviewed very regularly. This aspect was also discussed in section 5.2 which found that the relevance of initiatives analysed was also regularly reviewed. In some areas, such as ICT or advanced manufacturing, technology changes quickly and consequently one would expect organisations to review these qualifications and frameworks regularly. However, the study found that regular reviews were much more widespread. This may reflect that organisations have to demonstrate their qualifications or frameworks are current in order to gain traction with employers and professionals.

The quality assurance processes that organisations have in place vary considerably. Some organisations, and particularly established awarding bodies, have extensive systems in place to approve providers, training courses and teachers. Other

organisations have less thorough processes, and mainly review the curriculum for compliance with the requirements of the framework.

It is notable that quality assurance arrangements focus more on the content of the qualification and the certification processes (in particular: assessment), rather than how it is delivered (the teaching process).

8 Implications for the EQF

Main findings

- The study analysed 3 main options (with alternatives) for possible linkages with the EQF. These options and alternatives are:

  Status quo/enhanced status quo:

  - 1A – Self-declared link made by the organisations without any proof of meeting EQF referencing criteria
  - 1A + Self-declared link following a predefined guidance but there is no verification process
  - 1B Linking through the NQFs

  Strengthening indirect linkage through the NQFs:

  - 2A Based on an agreement on common criteria for linking ISQs
  - 2B Improved transparency of procedures followed by the NQFs

  Developing a direct linkage to the EQF

  - 3A Direct linkage of ISQFs to the EQF
  - 3B Direct linkage of ISQs to the EQF

- In the status quo, organisations can either directly link to the EQF informally or link through NQFs. Neither of these options are ideal. Informal linkage means there is no validation process for decisions, which means some initiatives that use EQF levels may not meet EQF principles of learning outcomes and quality assurance. Formal linkage is not widely available and could result in initiatives being linked to different EQF levels.

- Strengthening indirect linkage (option 2A and 2B) to the EQF should improve the process of referencing international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications to NQFs, so that in turn these would give a coherent access to linkages with the EQF. Increasing linkage to NQFs will also help improve the recognition of initiatives in national markets.

- However, these benefits are only likely to be realised if a large number of countries have processes for linking initiatives to their NQFs. However, some may have to change or introduce new processes, and/or change legislation. As a consequence, there may be little appetite among national competent authorities to change their current system.

- Option 3B (direct linkage to the EQF) was the preferred option for most organisations that participated in the workshop. It is seen as the easiest way of linkage and less time-consuming and burdensome than to go through the NQFs. It is also expected, that the value of ISQs would be strengthened and they would be better recognised at national level, once they have a formal relation to the EQF. Linkage to the EQF would then enable faster and less complicated inclusion in NQFs.

- This option may be difficult to implement as it requires the buy-in from national authorities and the European Commission. It is understand that some national authorities have reservations on recognising qualifications outside of formal education, which could make it difficult to gain this buy-in. However, there are 9 organisations that do recognise ISQs, which provides a solid base to build on.

8.1 Introductory statements about the status quo

The earlier sections show that:

- The number of international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications is rather high: the study identified 254 organisations in charge of such initiatives.

- The majority of these initiatives are qualifications, suites of qualifications or standards. Frameworks are in minority and no initiatives that could be described as qualifications systems were identified.

- Some of these initiatives already have high numbers of users. This is in particular the case of qualifications or standards. It is less clear for the frameworks.

- There is 'appetite' among organisations managing these initiatives to create a link with the EQF;

- In some organisations it is accepted that this can be done through an NQF, but others are already using a direct link with the EQF without having referenced to any NQF;

- The vast majority of initiatives identified align with the core EQF principle of using learning outcomes;

- High number of initiatives also comply with the other core principle which is the existence of quality assurance procedures. The understanding of what is the most suitable form of quality assurance, and to what extent it needs to be formalised, varies greatly. However, these variations also exist across countries and within NQFs.

These findings underpin the rest of the analysis presented in this section.

8.2 Overview of the options

The study examined potential options for linking the international sectoral qualifications and frameworks to the EQF. These options are summarised in Table 8 below.

Table 8.   Potential options for linking international sectoral qualifications, standards and frameworks to the EQF

Options	Description
Status quo/enhanced status quo	
Option 1A – Organisations making a direct link to the EQF themselves	Currently it is possible for organisations to link to the EQF without any formal verification process at an EU-level. This can be called soft-linkage as it is informational and self-ascribed.
Option 1A + - Self-declared linkage based on a common set of criteria but no verification process	This option is about organisations making a self-declared link but following a common template providing evidence of the linkage with EQF and adherence to core principles. These statements are reported and made publicly available.
Option 1B – Organisations link to the EQF through NQFs	Organisations are also able to display EQF levels from linking their qualifications or frameworks to one or more NQFs.
Strengthening indirect linkage to EQF	

Option 2A: Creating an agreement on requirements for ISQs to be included into a NQF	At present, national competent authorities may have differing processes for linking ISQs to NQFs, which could affect trust in the linking process. This option explores the implications of creating minimum requirements for ISQs to be included into an NQF.
Option 2B: Improve transparency on the national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF	This option aims to share information on the processes that competent authorities have in place to link ISQs to NQFs, in order to build trust in the approaches being used.
Developing a process for directly linkage	
Option 3A: Direct linkage of ISQS/F to the EQF	This option is to develop an EU approach to linking standards or frameworks directly to the EQF, through a consistent linking process (possibly based on the EQF referencing requirements).
Option 3b: Direct linkage of ISQ to the EQF	This option is to develop a consistent EU process to link individual ISQs to the EQF.

The options were identified in the interim report and examined in the qualitative interviews with organisations managing the initiatives identified. The interviews specifically explored:

- Organisation interest in link qualifications to the NQF and EQF

- Where applicable, organisations' experiences of linking qualifications to NQFs and the EQF, including lessons on the effectiveness of the status quo

- Interviewees' perceptions of the advantaged and disadvantages of the proposed options, and their preferred option

- Organisations' capacity and wiliness to meet the conditions for each of the options (e.g. whether they would be willing to meet the EQF referencing criteria to link qualifications directly to the EQF)

This information was synthesised to produce a 'SWOT' analysis of each option.

8.3   Status quo/enhanced status quo

Option 1A: No official linking or referencing process – organisations define the link to the EQF themselves

As described in section 6.4, forty-four of the organisations covered by the interviews in this study link their initiatives to the EQF levels and more than one-fifth do so without any official process of linking trough an NQF or any other kind of verification (which currently does not exist). Since a high number of interviewees emphasised (expected) benefits from a linkage to the EQF, it can be assumed that the number of these 'soft linkages' might grow in the future.

On the one hand, this approach is considered as useful because it supports the development of qualifications, standards and frameworks that follow the logic of the EQF and its principles (in particular, learning outcomes) and this seems to fit to the needs of the international sectoral organisations. In the workshops, organisations present also unanimously believed that direct linkage to the EQF is of greatest interest to them.

The option also gives organisations the opportunities to use EQF levels without placing a significant administrative cost on them. This approach has also been supported by EU-funding streams for projects.

However, the issue with this approach is that there is no control on the extent to which the initiatives (qualifications, standards and frameworks) respect the EQF principles of learning outcomes and quality assurance. There is no possibility to ensure that the display of EQF levels will be based on an accurate reflection of the level of learning outcomes. Moreover, there is a risk that the EQF levels would be used in an inconsistent manner which could undermine the credibility of the EQF. There are risks of misusing the EQF level in order to signal a higher value of a qualification that is not adhered to in reality. Potential users would not be able to distinguish easily between a qualification that has an EQF level because of its inclusion in an NQF that is referenced to the EQF and a qualification that bears a 'self-assigned' EQF level. Thus, this approach is likely to undermine the trust in the EQF.

It is planned that information on qualifications included in national qualifications databases (and in NQFs) will be available in the 'Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe'[47]. This could, of course, support users in identifying qualifications linked to the EQF via their inclusion in NQFs. However, it can be expected that the development of the portal will probably still take some time before it can be used for coherent information on qualifications linked to NQFs from European countries.

It should be noted that a number of initiatives which use this approach have been developed through EU-funded projects. They have therefore developed approaches to linking to the EQF which have been funded by EU funds and, in a certain way, endorsed through the approval of the project reports. Considering that these actions have strictly no value, and seeing them as purely self-declaratory in the same sense as if an organisation on its own decides on the EQF levelling, would send a very negative message to the organisations and also the value of a given funding stream.

As noted above, in case nothing changes at EU level, it is likely that the number of initiatives with a self-declared reference to the EQF is likely to continue increasing.

Status quo 1A+ (enhanced)

This alternative of option 1A aims to provide a common methodology for referencing without putting in place a proper governance and endorsement process:

- Under this option the link to the EQF would be self-declared by the organisations but following a common set of criteria and a common template for demonstrating evidence;

- There would be no official endorsement or approval of the outcome of the referencing process but the referencing reports would be made publicly available.

For this option the EU would provide a common methodology and a related template that organisations in charge of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives should follow. If they follow the template to demonstrate the link with the EQF, the information would be made available on the EQF portal.

This would:

- Partly address the lack of coherence over methods for creating linkages with the EQF; and

- Create greater transparency over how such referencing has been made.

Status quo 1B: Linkage to the EQF through the NQF

The study analysed eleven initiatives directly linked to an NQF. In a further fourteen initiatives, national qualifications were based on international standards and these national qualifications were linked to NQFs (see section 6.2). The main reason

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[47] http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en

organisations linked to NQFs was to help increase access, recognition and progression in the national labour market. Therefore, one would expect organisations will want to reference to NQFs even if they had the option to reference directly to the EQF.

When a qualification is first linked to an NQF and then subsequently linked to the EQF (though the NQF) this means the indirect linkage to the EQF has been through some form of verification process. At a minimum, one would expect this to include some analysis to assign an appropriate level and the requirement that the qualification is described in learning outcomes and quality assurance underpins its award.

Decisions on linkage in one country can also be an example in other countries. However, there is currently no guarantee that an ISQ referenced in two different NQFs would be aligned with the same EQF level. There is a risk that qualifications defined in multiple NQFs can be linked to different EQF levels. This may occur because there may be a desire to assign ISQs to same level as national qualifications for the same occupation. However, occupations can differ greatly by country and consequently the same qualification can be assigned to different levels in different countries. This may also affect trust in the EQF.

The quality assurance requirements that NQFs are likely to adhere to will vary considerably by country. It is unlikely organisations have existing processes to meet these requirements - In section 7 the study shows considerable variation in quality assurance approaches of the initiatives analysed. Consequently, organisations will have to change their processes. In some cases, they may also need to translate their processes to adhere with the requirements of certain national authorities.

Some organisations also reported difficulties in referencing tier initiatives to NQFs. A few stated that it was not possible to reference NQFs, or the process was too burdensome and time-consuming to be feasible.

Other questions voiced are:

- Does an international initiative need to link to one NQF or several or all in order for the link to the EQF to be seen as solid? Linking to one NQF only could lead to a certain race for the bottom – finding and NQF that is least 'demanding' in terms of procedures and evidence. On the other hand, it can hardly be expected that an initiative would undergo the process of linking to many NQFs, in particular if it is already operating internationally;

- Why would an international organisation with an international mandate seek recognition through a national framework when there is a transnational European framework? For those organisations that are solely interested in an EQF alignment and not a link to one specific country's national qualifications system or framework, the idea of going through an NQF to establish a link with the EQF can be somewhat incongruent and in the workshops some organisations feared the sectoral or international dimensions of their qualifications could get lost.

Through interviews most organisations reported dissatisfaction with the fact that they cannot currently establish an official link with the EQF other than through an NQF. Where qualifications were developed as EU-wide initiatives (rather than qualifications originally used in some countries but them applied internationally) there is a strong desire to improve processes for linking to NQFs, or for there to be an approach for directly linking qualifications to the EQF.

In case nothing changes, this status quo will also continue evolving:

- Those national organisations which have international ambitions are likely to continue using the route of NQFs in order to create a link with the EQF;

- It can also be expected that progressively a growing number of national qualifications (formal or non-formal) will be based on international standards/

qualifications. In such case the link though the EQF would also be made mostly through NQFs;

- It is unlikely that those organisations that already use a direct self-declared link with the EQF will reference their initiative to an NQF just to gain access to the EQF.

8.4 Option 2: Link to one NQF based on common procedure/criteria

This option should improve the process of referencing international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications to NQFs, so that in turn these would give a coherent access to linkages with the EQF.

There are two possible ways of doing this:

- Creating an agreement on minimum standards for how these initiatives should be linked to NQFs. This would help national competent authorities develop. consistent procedures for referencing to NQFs. It should also provide clear guidance to organisations managing these initiatives on the requirements that they will have to fulfil in order to link their qualifications to an NQF.

- Sharing information on the national procedures and requirements being used to link international qualifications to the NQF, in order to improve transparency and increase trust in the process.

Criteria and procedures

In order to implement Option 2, the following criteria and procedures would probably need to be followed:

- The EQF level obtained through referencing to one NQF is recognised and valued in other countries and seen as equivalent to national qualifications.

- Organisations that are responsible for international sectoral qualifications, frameworks or systems have the capacity, capability and authority to meet a set of EU-wide minimum standards

- National competent authorities have a desire to develop processes to link international sectoral qualifications, frameworks and systems to their NQF.

- There is buy-in from national competent authorities to introduce minimum standards and share information on their national procedures and requirements for linking ISQs to NQFs.

- Presented below is analysis on the extent to which these criteria and procedures will be achieved.

The EQF level obtained through referencing to one NQF is recognised and valued in other countries and seen as equivalent to national qualifications.

Some organisations were concerned that a qualification that is referenced to an NQF of a foreign country may not have the same 'currency' in the local labour market as if it was referenced to the national NQF, even if that qualification has an assigned EQF level. In other words, the organisations were concerned about mutual recognition of NQF levelling. They were also worried that they might still need to undergo multiple referencing processes to multiple NQFs.

A few organisations also believed that there may be less awareness of the EQF among small employers compared to the awareness about the NQF. These organisations thought the link to an NQF had some form of primacy over the link with the EQF.

As a consequence, some organisations believed that they would likely have to continue to link qualifications to a range of NQFs to ensure they are recognised in their key markets.

Only a few organisations believed that if the access to EQF levels is made through an NQF link, then the EQF levels would be recognised in other countries.

Organisations that are responsible for international sectoral qualifications, frameworks or systems have the capacity and capability to meet a set of EU-wide minimum standards

Eleven organisations have already linked international qualifications or frameworks to an NQF. This indicates that there is some capacity in the sector to meet standards for linking NQFs. Some of these organisations have also linked their initiatives to more than one NQF.

However, all but two of the organisations that linked international qualifications, systems and frameworks to an NQF found the procedure to be burdensome and slow. This suggests that if national minimum standards were set then some organisations would continue to find it difficult to link their qualifications to an NQF. Moreover, perceived difficulties in linking qualifications to one or more NQF may discourage organisations for attempting to do so, which could result in some organisations indirectly linking to the EQF.

It is also likely that some countries will adopt requirements over and above a set of minimum requirements, in order to ensure ISQs linked to their NQF meet the same criteria as national qualifications. As shown in section 7, the quality assurance systems that organisations have in place is variable and consequently some will struggle to meet these requirements. This could mean that organisations choose to reference only to certain NQFs, and not the ones that are most relevant to their organisation.

National competent authorities have a desire to develop processes to link international sectoral qualifications, frameworks and systems to their NQF

Setting minimum standards will increase the consistency of current national approaches to link initiatives to NQFs. However, in order to ensure that organisations choose to link their qualifications to NQFs, there needs to be a broad range of countries recognising international sectoral initiatives. At present, only a few countries have processes in place or plans to recognise international sectoral initiatives in future.

Consequently there are reasons to see suggest that a significant step-change in national approaches to including ISQs is needed. It is likely that this process will take time, as in many countries NQFs are at an early stage of maturity. In the short term it is unlikely that there will be a significant number of countries including ISQs in their NQFs, which will likely result in organisations not linking qualifications to the EQF or doing so through direct self-declared linkage.

Gaining sufficient buy-in from national competent authorities

To implement this option there needs to be buy-in among national competent authorities. These organisations need to be willing to implement minimum standards and to share their procedures and requirements for linking ISQs to NQFs.

At present, there is no evidence to suggest national authority will not be willing to implement standards as this aspect was not analysed in this study. However, it is likely that some countries may not have the capacity to introduce these changes immediately. Introducing minimum standards may in some cases also require a change in legislation, which will likely take time. There may also be significant repercussions to introducing minimum requirements, as national competent authorities may consequently need to change how they recognise national qualifications, to ensure they employ a consistent set of requirements.

Furthermore, it is highly likely that before considering the referencing of ISQs countries need to solve the issue of referencing national qualifications that originate outside the formal education and training sectors. In many countries, this debate is still to come and likely to take some time.

Sharing information on the national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF is likely to be less troublesome to introduce. There are existing structures in place (such as the EQF Advisory Group, NCP meetings) where this information can be shared. Sharing information is unlikely to be burdensome to organisations.

Pros and cons of strengthening indirect linkage to the EQF

Relatively few organisations believed that strengthening indirect linkage to the EQF was their preferred option. This was largely because the current processes for linking qualifications to NQFs were seen as burdensome. Organisations believed it would be less resource-intensive to link qualifications directly to the EQF.

However, in the workshop, most organisations considered it their second-best option in case there is clearly no possibility to create a direct linkage. They considered that if direct linkage is not possible than at least countries should be using the same criteria and ensuring that referencing of one ISQ is not possible at different levels in different countries.

A few organisations did however report that in order to achieve recognition at a national level, in particular to get access to public funding, they would need qualifications to be linked to NQFs. In these cases, organisations would likely link to multiple NQFs, in which case minimum standards would simplify the process as there would be greater convergence in the processes national competent authorities apply.

The benefit of linking to NQFs is that qualifications are likely to gain a better national recognition, particularly in the short-term, as it would be easier for employers and learners to assess equivalence to national qualifications. However, as the EQF becomes more established, it is likely that the benefit of referencing to NQFs will decrease.

Strengthening indirect linkage will likely have the greater impact on increasing the ease with which organisations can link initiatives to NQFs. However, it is also likely to have a significant resource implication on some national competent authorities. Some may have to change or introduce new processes, and/or change legislation. As a consequence, there may be little appetite among national competent authorities to change their current system. Moreover, if the changes were introduced, they would likely be realised over a three to five year horizon, as a minimum.

Sharing information on the national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF is likely to be easier to implement. However, it is not clear the extent to which this will increase trust in ISQs, particularly when they are being compared with well-established national qualifications which may be perceived to have more rigorous quality assurance procedures.

Possible action

A key challenge to setting minimum standards is identifying what standards are sufficient. If the standards are too onerous, then organisations will not be willing to link qualifications to NQF. However, if the standards are set too low, some countries may not recognise ISQs referenced to other NQFs.

To gain broad EU-wide recognition, the standards will also need to cover all aspects of the design and implementation of international qualifications, frameworks and systems. This includes:

- How the organisation ensures the initiatives are based on labour market needs

- Approaches taken to describe (in terms of learning outcomes) and level the qualifications

- How training quality is assured, even when training is delivered by third parties

- How assessments are designed and delivered

- How student and employer feedback is used to refine the initiatives

Discussions on appropriate standards for each of the point above will need to take place with national competent authorities. This may initially be through a working group of the EQF Advisory Group.

Once the standards are agreed, an appropriate timetable will need to be set on when these changes could be accomplished. The timetable needs to reflect that countries may need to significantly change their approach for including ISQs to NQFs, which may require changes in legislation.

Sharing information on national processes for linking ISQs to the NQF should be easier to implement. This would require an initial information gathering exercise with national competent authorities, which would then need to be synthesised and distributed to members.

However, if this form of linkage is purely based on transparency of ways in which ISQs are linked to NQFs, it could create the already mentioned race to the bottom whereby the organisations would choose to link to that NQF where it is easiest.

8.5 Option 3: Direct link to the EQF

This option is about the development and introduction of an 'official' procedure for directly linking international sectoral initiatives to the EQF. At present a direct linkage with the EQF is not possible because there are no procedures, criteria or institutional structures in place and no agreement across 'EQF countries' to establish such structures. For the referencing of NQFs to the EQF, the 'EQF referencing criteria and procedures' have been developed and are in use. They refer to key principles that would also need to be followed for linking international sectoral initiatives directly to the EQF.

Criteria and procedures

In the interviews the research team examined the potential of initiatives to comply with the below principles:

- There is a clear and demonstrable link between the initiative (framework levels or qualification/standards descriptors) and the EQF levels;

- The framework or qualifications/standards are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes;

- In the case of international sectoral qualifications frameworks, the existence of transparent procedures for inclusion of qualifications into the qualifications framework;

- Existence of quality assurance procedures for all aspects of qualification design and award;

- Production of a report by a competent body setting out the setting out the linkage to the EQF and the evidence supporting it.

The respective information is not available for all organisations and initiatives covered in this study because, for example, not all organisations are interested in a link to the EQF and some interviewees were not well informed about the EQF. Sometimes interviewees only presented their assumptions because they did not have sufficient knowledge about these principles and procedures and what they might imply for their initiatives. Based on interviewees' statements it can be assumed that, in general, those who are interested in a linkage EQF are usually willing and able to comply with the (adapted) EQF referencing criteria. The following tendencies can be observed:

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the initiative (framework levels or qualification/standards descriptors) and the EQF levels

Most of the interviewees (N=51) state that they are already able to demonstrate the link of their initiative with EQF levels (e.g. because the qualification or framework was developed based on the EQF) or that they might be able to do so because learning outcomes descriptions are used. However, this linking is often done internally, and consequently it is not always clear to assess whether the approaches used actually facilitate the mapping of these initiatives to EQF levels.

The reasons for non-compliance with this criterion, mentioned by only few interviewees (N=6), refer to the fact that learning outcomes are not used and that the respective initiative started and evolved through years long before EQF was developed.

The framework or qualifications/standards are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes

Even more interviewees confirmed their possibility to comply with this criterion (N=58) because their initiatives are already described in terms of learning outcomes or they are currently being developed.

In case of international sectoral qualifications frameworks: Existence of transparent procedures for inclusion of qualifications into the qualifications framework

For five of the nine ISQFs included in this study it is stated that there are clear procedures for including qualifications or that they are in development. Most of them were developed in the context of EU projects. For the remaining four, there are no specific or quality assured procedures. It was stated, for example, that 'inclusion is based on self-referencing'.

Existence of quality assurance procedures for all aspects of qualification design and award

Compliance with this criterion seems to be more challenging and the requirements that might have to be met are less clear. Nevertheless, more than half of the interviewees (N=39) stated that they have such quality assurance procedures in place. The approaches, however, differ. For example, they might refer to internal procedures (e.g. in case of ISQs that are also awarded by their organisation) or to national quality assurance procedures (e.g. in case of standards that are integrated into national qualifications).

Several interviewees pointed out that they have quality assurance procedures in place but only for certain aspects. For example, accreditation procedures for training and examination centers might exist but not systematic quality assurance arrangements for the design of qualifications. Others might have clear quality procedures for the design and update of qualifications but not for training providers delivering the qualifications. It was also emphasized that it might be problematic to impose requirements on all organisations that wish to deliver the qualifications and this might have a negative effect on the take-up of these qualifications. In some cases, interviewees mentioned that they would probably need to adapt and further develop their quality assurance procedures in order to comply with this criterion.

In relation to initiatives developed in EU-funded projects, some interviewees referred to plans to focus on the design of quality assurance projects in follow-up projects.

Production of a report by a competent body setting out the setting out the linkage to the EQF and the evidence supporting it

The interviewees who responded to the questions related to compliance with these criteria and are interested in linking their initiatives to the EQF usually confirmed that they would be able to produce such a report. However, several interviewees raised the issue of who or what type of organisations would be considered as 'competent body'.

Pros and cons of directly linking to the EQF

Most of the organisations responsible for international and sectoral qualifications and frameworks analysed in this study consider this option as the preferred one.

It is seen as the easiest way of linkage and less time-consuming and burdensome than to go through the NQFs. NQF inclusion procedures are considered to be very tedious and ineffective because countries are at different development stages of their NQF. Furthermore, a high number of stakeholders need to be involved and the outcome is not predictable. In particular for organizations that are not based in Europe, it would be easier to have one set of criteria and one actor to deal with than with those of several countries.

It is also expected, that the value of ISQs would be strengthened and they would be better recognised at national level, once they have a formal relation to the EQF. Linkage to the EQF would then enable faster and less complicated inclusion in NQFs. The effect of an official link to the EQF would also be a consistent linkage of an ISQ to the same EQF level. Getting different levels in different countries for the same qualification is considered as leading to 'regulatory arbitrage' which could create major obstacle towards a European labour market. Without a direct linkage procedure there is also a risk that organisations responsible for international sectoral initiatives could simply go to the country which has the most lenient requirements for getting a link to the EQF via inclusion in an NQF. This would undermine quality and trust in the EQF.

Several of the ISQs, standards and frameworks are closely aligned to the EQF already by design. Nevertheless, a formal linkage could further promote the acceptance of a framework and the recognition of its qualifications. Furthermore, the direct-linkage approach is seen as more relevant for the qualifications they include, which aim for EU-wide recognition and enhancement of mobility across Europe.

Finally, some interviewees stated that this option seems to be the preferred one but they would need more information on procedures and criteria as well as on implications for their initiatives and actual impact and benefits.

Some reluctance as well as some concerns were also expressed. For example, it was stated that this approach will deepen the disconnection currently existing between NQFs in many countries and the EQF.

The main open questions refer to the following:

- *Who* would actually decide or approve linkages to the EQF? It is a political sensible issue. If this option was made possible a format of involving Member States would be needed otherwise this approach would not work. Education and training is the responsibility of Member States and they are usually critical towards EU influence on their qualifications system. Some interviewees rate the option of a direct linkage to the EQF actually as unrealistic because 'it will not work to go beyond national regulations' or – as expressed by another of interviewee - 'for some countries you don't have any other chance than deal with the national authority, so it is difficult to have an agreement on recognising EU authority on this'. One option could be setting up a committee comprised of representatives of all Member States and stakeholders who ensure a broad representation and have authority over the matter. However, for qualifications where there is a recognised European organisation representing that profession this organisation also needs to be involved in the linkage process.

- *How* could this be accomplished? Interviewees agreed that specific rules and procedures need to be established but also emphasised that the linkage procedures should not be too complicated or too bureaucratic. They should be developed commonly by Members States to ensure broad acceptance. There is also a need for an active involvement of EQF experts that would support or guide the linkage to the EQF.

One interviewee made in interesting distinction: The direct linkage approach is the best solution for all kinds of 'new' sectors and qualifications, where no strong national systems are established yet, to start straight from a European perspective. For more traditional professions, however, the inclusion in NQFs seems to be the more acceptable choice.

Possible action

Enabling a direct link with the EQF implies the following clarifications and specifications:

- Which type of initiatives can be officially linked with the EQF (i.e. which pre-conditions could be set)?

  - The process could be restricted to ISQFs however these represent only a minority of all international sectoral initiatives and therefore would leave out most of the initiatives in this area, and in particular most of those with high numbers of users;

  - The process could be restricted to or refer to ISQs. For this, an agreement on a definition of ISQs is needed. It could also use a set of criteria to decide which ISQs can be linked to the EQF. Such criteria could refer to: emerging profession (i.e. qualifications linked to more traditional fields should be linked via NQF inclusion), relevance for the labour market (the qualifications being recognised by a number of companies), broad country coverage, number of users (a minimum number of persons holding the qualification could be defined), maturity (number of years in use), etc.

  - The process could be restricted to or include international sectoral standards. This is of interest insofar as there are already initiatives that are closely related: On the one hand, the common training frameworks that are currently being developed for regulated professions and that are supposed to be linked to the EQF, and on the other hand, the potential development of European core profiles of qualifications as a common set of learning outcomes that might also bear an EQF level. Furthermore, it would need to be clearly communicated that national qualifications including these standards might also include other elements or refer to national specifications; thus, the qualifications themselves might still end up at different EQF levels via NQF inclusion.

  - The process could include all types of initiatives.

- What are the criteria and procedures for EQF linkage?

  The EQF referencing criteria would need to be adjusted as a number of them are not suitable for ISQs or standards. This concerns in particular:

  - The first criterion about NCPs; and
  - The fourth criterion about including qualifications in the NQF;
  - The remaining criteria could be adjusted in terms of wording.

  Particular attention would need to be paid to quality assurance. The requirements to be fulfilled by the international sectoral organisations and the evidence that would need to be provided would have to be clarified.

  At this stage, the criterion about quality assurance was designed for referencing of frameworks or systems not for referencing of single qualifications. There would need to be clarity about the fact that quality assurance has to cover all aspects: design of the qualification (and development of learning outcomes), delivery of training, assessment and certification.

Furthermore, it would need to be considered to what extent and how the procedures are to be adapted for different types of international sectoral initiatives.

- What is the process to follow and who needs to be involved in decisions?

  This includes clarity about the process to follow from the side of organisations applying for linkage to the EQF. In particular it would be needed to clarify:

  - Who makes the decision about EQF linkages and who needs to be involved in preparatory activities?
  - On what basis (what documentation and evidence is required from the organisations applying)?
  - How can the process draw in the views of professionals and utilise external experts for checking levelling decisions?

  Other more operational aspects would also need to be defined such as:

  - How could this process best be organised to be efficient and as less bureaucratic as possible?
  - Periodicity with which the body making the decision meets;
    The quality assurance procedures for this body.
  - How can it be ensured that decisions are recognised and supported by the majority of countries?

- How to avoid misuse of the EQF label?

  Although in case a direct linkage procedure was implemented, there would still be the possibility that 'self-assignment' of EQF levels could be continued. Specifics steps could be taken to ensure that the end user is able to distinguish between 'officially' assigned and self-assigned EQF levels, for example, by:

  - Restricting and protecting the use of the EQF label (if possible);
  - Using and communicating the EU portal as database for qualifications with officially assigned EQF levels.

8.6   Comparison of options

In this section we draw on the research conducted to appraise each of the proposed options. We specifically assess:

- **Benefits**, in terms of helping worker mobility by improving the recognition and transparency of ISQs. The benefits are rated on a scale from -5 to 5, with zero being the status quo. To score 5 the option has major benefits, whereas to score -5 the option has major dis-benefits

- **Costs** of implementing the option on national authorities, the European Commission and ISQ 'owners'. Costs are from a scale of -5 to 5, with -5 being a significant cost, and 5 being a significant saving. Zero denotes the current costs incurred by stakeholders to link ISQs to the EQF (the status quo). We consider both one-off costs and on-going costs, with the latter given a higher rating.

- **Unintended consequences** of the option. This refers to any wider behaviour change that could result from the option. For example, it could result in organisations making inaccurate linking decisions, or could discourage organisations from using EQF levels. Unintended consequences are scaled from -5 to 5, with 5 being a positive consequence and -5 being a negative consequence. Zero means there are no negative or positive consequences expected.

- **Feasibility** of the option. This relates to the ease in which the option can be implemented. Some options may require significant buy-in from a range of organisations, which may be difficult to acquire. Feasibility is scaled between 0

to 5, with 0 being difficult to implement and 5 being very easy to implement. The status quo is 5, as it is already in place and therefore requires no additional action.

Table 9.   Appraisal of options

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 1A: Status quo - organisations making a direct link to the EQF themselves	0	0	-3	5	**Benefits:** This benefit of this option, compared to other options available in the status quo, is that it increases the use of EQF levels for describing ISQs. Some organisations that do not have the capacity to link through an NQF can still use EQF levels as a comparison tool. However, it does not provide any additional benefits to the status quo (it is the status quo).
					Costs: The costs for implementing this option is zero, as it requires no additional action for the European Commission, National Authorities or 'owners' of ISQs.
					Unintended consequences: Linking of ISQs to the EQF without a formal validation process could result inaccurate decisions about levelling and the use of learning outcomes. This could reduce trust in the EQF, and also send out the wrong signals to end users.
					The study found that only a few organisations used external verification on levelling decision. This means there is a risk of inaccurate levelling decisions, as ISQs have not been benchmarked to other qualifications. On balance, the unintended consequence of this option was scored as -3.
					Feasibility: The option is very feasible as it requires no additional work

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 1A + Enhanced status quo - guided self-declared link	1	-1	-2	5	**Benefits:** Similarly to Option 1A, this option encourages the use of EQF levels for describing ISQs. As the guide is optional, it is unlikely to affect this take up. However, the option will slightly increase the consistency of levelling decisions, which in turn would improve trust in the EQF. Consequently, we believe the benefit of this option, compared to 1A, is 1.

Costs: This requires a one-off cost to European Commission, which will largely be negligible. The guide can generally draw on the requirements for EQF referencing and consequently be developed quickly. It could potentially be developed internally by DG EMPL in cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group (possibly supported by an external organisation), and then hosted on the EQF portal.

The option has no cost implication on national authorities. The option will however have a small cost implication on ISQs, as they may undertake a more onerous process for linking their initiatives to the EQF.

Unintended consequences: There remains a risk that ISQ owners may make inaccurate linking decisions, but this risk should be reduced as the guide will give ISQ owners a clearer sense of the procedures they have to employ make effective linking decisions.

There may still however be inaccurate linking decisions if the take-up and application of the guide is be variable, or if organisations decide to use only some of the criteria. Consequently, we believe the option will only slightly address this unintended consequence of 1A, and therefore we have scored it as -2).

Feasibility: This option is straightforward to implement, as it does not require significant buy-in from stakeholders. The only challenge will be in ensuring the guidance is promoted effectively to ISQ owners. However, this could be done through promoting the guide directly to the organisations identified in the study and hosting the guide on the EQF portal. |

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 1B: Status quo - Organisations link to the EQF through NQFs	0	-1	-2	4	**Benefits:** This approach ensures that the linking of ISQs to the EQF is robust as it has followed a validation process. However, the linking of ISQs to the EQF is low as some organisations do not have the resources to meet NQF linking criteria. In addition, some organisations will not be able to link their qualification in their original language as only a few countries have procedures for linking NQFs. The option has no additional benefits above the status quo, as it is the status quo. **Costs:** There are no costs to the European Commission for implementing this option. However, ISQ owners and national authorities incur costs for linking initiatives to NQFs (which could include administration or translation costs). ISQ owners have to implement the procedures necessary to meet country requirements, and national authorities have to validate the procedures used by ISQ owners for developing learning outcomes and levelling the qualifications. We recognise that some organisations decide to link their initiatives to a range of NQFs. However, this is mainly to gain access to national funding or to improve recognition in national markets, rather than to link to the EQF. We have therefore not considered this as a cost for the option. The cost for linking to an NQF is however higher than option 1A. We therefore score the cost as -1. **Unintended consequences:** In this option, all the initiatives will be validated to ensure they comply with NQF requirements. Consequently, these qualifications will use learning outcomes and having effective QA processes in place. Many organisations link their qualifications to multiple NQFs, mainly to access national funding. However, relatively few countries have procedures for linking ISQs to the NQF, and those that do often have differing procedures for linking ISQs to their NQF. In a few cases, this has resulted in initiatives being linked to different EQF levels, which undermines trust in the EQF as a transparency tool. We have therefore scored this at -2 (a significant negative consequence, but a problem that is not yet very widespread) **Feasibility:** The option does not require any additional action for the European Commission, national authorities of owners of ISQs. Consequently, the feasibility is scored at 5. However, it does require owners of ISQs to undergo a process that is burdensome by many.

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 2A: Creating an agreement on requirements for ISQs to be included into a NQF	2	-2	-1	3	**Benefits:** The option creates a more consistent process for ISQ owners to link their qualifications to NQFs. This will reduce the risk of qualifications being linked to different EQF levels. Countries are likely to make more consistent levelling decisions, which will in turn increase trust in the EQF. However, the requirements for linking ISQs to NQFs are still likely to differ by country. Some countries will include requirements over and above the minimum requirements, which reflect the requirements that have in place to reference national qualifications to their NQF. Consequently, there will likely still be some inconsistency of practice. The minimum requirements may result in some new countries recognising ISQs, but it is still likely there will be some that do not. This means there will remain problems of organisations not being able to link their qualifications to the most appropriate NQF(s). As a consequence, we have scored the benefit of this option as 2. **Costs:** The European Commission will, in collaboration with national authorities, need agree a set of minimum requirements for linking ISQs to NQFs. This could be done through a sub-group of the EQF AG. It will be complex, but the cost to the European Commission of developing the standards will be low as they can largely be built upon national authorities existing procedures. It will primarily be a one-off cost, although the requirements will need to be reviewed regularly to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose. The option will have a small cost on national authorities. They will have a one-off cost for changing their procedures and the on-going cost of implementing a new system for linking ISQs to NQFs. The option may could result in owners of initiatives having to undertake a more onerous process to link their initiatives to NQFs. However, if the organisation was to link to more than one NQF, they would likely experience a saving as the criteria employed by different countries will be more similar. Consequently we believe that, on balance, the cost to owners of initiatives will be not change significantly. Altogether, the cost of the initiative has been scored as -2 (higher than the status quo, but not significantly higher). **Unintended consequences:** If the minimum requirements are more onerous than the status quo, then organisations may decide to instead link their qualification directly to the EQF. However, ~~it should be possible to~~ ensure that the minimum requirements are robust without being unduly onerous on organisations. It is still however possible for ISQs to be linked to different EQF levels, but this will be far less likely if countries have consistent procedures in place. Consequently, we do not

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 2B: Improve transparency on the national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF	1	0	-1	4	**Benefits:** The option should increase the recognition of ISQs linked to the EQF, as countries will have a clearer understanding of how levelling decisions were made. This will help increase the recognition of EQF levels obtained through linking to an NQF. However, the impact is likely to be small as some national authorities may not believe that procedures employed by other countries are robust. Moreover, the option does not address the concern that the same ISQ may be referenced at different levels in different NQFs. Consequently, we have scored the benefit as 1. **Costs:** Implementing the option will have a minimal cost implication on the European Commission, national authorities or owners of ISQs. The sharing of national procedures can be done through existing country networks such as the EQF AG and NCP meetings. The cost of collating this information at a national level should also be minimal. Consequently, we have scored the costs as 0. **Unintended consequences:** Some countries will have more thorough procedures than others. This variation, if sizeable, may erode trust in the linking decisions made by other countries. This, in turn, could affect result in countries not recognising ISQs achieved in certain countries. However, this will not be a significant problem as organisations could overcome these issues by linking their initiatives to more than one NQF (which many do). Consequently, we have scored this as -1. **Feasibility:** The option should be straightforward to implement as it does not require national authorities of organisations to make any substantial changes to their processes. In addition, there is only a small cost implication for implementing the option. The only risk is that countries will be unwilling to share their national procedures and requirements being used to link ISQs to the NQF. However, we expect most will be willing to do so as most countries already share information on referencing and linking decisions through the EQF AG. Consequently, we have scored feasibility as 4.

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 3A: Direct linkage of ISQFs to the EQF	1	-2	-1	3	**Benefits:** This will ensure there is a robust system for organisations to link initiatives to the EQF, which in turn will increase trust in the EQF. However, it is unlikely to result in a significant increase in the number of ISQs using EQF levels, as most ISQs are not part of an ISQF. As a consequence, the benefit will be relatively small (1)

Costs: The option will have a significant cost for the European Commission. There will be a one-off cost of establishing a system for appraising ISQFs for entry onto the EQF, and on-going costs for subsequently examining individual ISQF that apply for entry. Some of the on-going costs could be recouped from charging ISQF owners a fee for linking their qualifications directly to the EQF. We would expect that most organisations would be willing to pay a fee which is broadly in line with the fees charged by national authorities.

National authorities will have to incur a negligible additional cost. They would most likely have to contribute and agree a system for linking ISQFs to the EQF, but other than members of the AG, would unlikely be involved in appraising IQSFs. Indeed, national authorities may experience a cost saving, as fewer ISQF owners will apply to have their qualifications linked to NQFs.

Unintended consequences: If the linking process is too onerous then organisations may choose not to link their qualifications to the EQF.

Feasibility: This is possible to implement, but there are number of delivery challenges will need to be resolved, including setting entry requirements (pre-conditions for linking to the EQF), developing the process and developing an approval system. The political resistance from Member States is likely to be high.

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
Option 3B: Direct linkage of ISQ to the EQF	5	-2	-1	3	**Benefits:** The option is considered to have the greatest benefits as it encourages organisations to use EQF levels as a tool to improve the recognition of qualifications, which in turn will increase work mobility and progression. The evidence from the workshops suggest that organisations are more likely to link to the EQF if they believe there is a route to link to it directly, as this promotes the transnational dimension of the initiative and is likely to be less burdensome that linking to NQFs. Providing direct linkage opportunities to ISQs will also ensure that all major initiatives will be able to link to the EQF directly. Consequently, we have scored the benefits as 5. **Costs:** The European Commission is likely to incur significant on-going costs for recognising ISQs. The costs are likely to be higher in the first few years, as there will be a backlog of organisations wanting to link directly to the EQF. The level of costs will depend on the procedures the European Commission will adopt, and which initiatives are eligible. Some of these costs could be recouped through fees charged to organisations National authorities are also likely to experience costs. These costs may be wholly experienced by EQF AG members, who will likely have to review and approve applicants. However, some of these costs will be offset from not having to link initiatives to NQFs. Owners of initiatives are likely to experience a cost saving, as linking to NQFs is seen as unnecessarily burdensome. However, they may have to pay an accreditation fee. Overall, we would consider the costs to be -3. This is the most costly option, but the costs are not excessive and are scored as less than the benefits. **Unintended consequences:** The only potential unintended consequence is that organisations may still have to link to NQFs in order to access national funding and ensure recognition at a national level. This may result in an additional cost on organisations. However, in the workshops organisations generally had a desire to link directly to the EQF, even if they still had to link to NQFs. Consequently, we would expect organisations to be willing to absorb these costs and consequently we would score the unintended consequence as 0.

Option	Benefits	Costs	Unintended consequences	Feasibility	Description
					Feasibility: This option may be difficult to implement as it requires the buy-in from national authorities and the European Commission. It is understood that some national authorities have reservations on recognising qualifications outside of formal education, which could make it difficult to gain this buy-in. However, there are 9 organisations that do recognise ISQs, which provides a solid base to build on. Consequently, we have assessed the feasibility as 2.

9 Conclusions and Recommendations

9.1 Conclusions

This study shows that international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications are a reality that cannot be neglected as in some cases they concern high numbers of people. These initiatives often exist at international level because of the need for recognition of qualifications for mobile individuals (mobile across countries or across companies/employers). They also exist because of the efforts from within the sector to professionalise a certain profession/ activity. In such cases, the international qualifications or standards are a way to address the absence of national qualifications and related trainings.

The study also shows that many of the organisations analysed in greater depth pay attention to issues of renewal of qualifications/ initiatives and their quality assurance. In fact, as most of these initiatives receive no or very little public funding the pressure to ensure that they are relevant and of quality is high, as it is a precondition for attracting learners and getting recognition by employers.

Learning outcomes are commonly used in these initiatives and they are used for the full range of processes: defining training programmes, setting the level of learners' achievement, assessment and certification. There is certainly great diversity in what this means on the ground and in practice. On the other hand, this is true for a large number of national qualifications as well. There is little basis to consider that the situation would be more negative, when it comes to the use of learning outcomes, than it is for national qualifications.

The study also shows that there is awareness of the EQF among these organisations and willingness to establish a link with EQF levels. This is not the case for all initiatives but for the majority of those interviewed. Some of the initiatives studied were modelled on the EQF concepts and levels. Others already refer to them explicitly.

There is no simple approach through which international sectoral initiatives in the field of qualifications could be linked to the EQF. As shown in the previous section each of the options analysed has a number of drawbacks. No action implies a number of risks. In particular, it is likely that organisations will continue using a self-declared link with the EQF in absence of a process through which they could establish a link. In the long run this could create concerns about consistency and credibility of the EQF if there is no evidence on how organisations came up with a certain levelling. No action at all would also most likely increase the frustration of the organisations in charge of these initiatives. The dissatisfaction with the status quo was shared during interviews and is unlikely to get better over time. This could mean that the EQF would be perceived as very much a state-led initiative rather than an initiative promoting recognition of all learning.

The study identified several options through which the status quo could be moved forward. None of them is ideal when looking at the combination of benefits versus costs and feasibility in particular in terms of likely political resistance. The options presented offer alternatives between ambitious options (in terms of benefits expected) that come with a cost and need to overcome some residence. Less controversial options are also presented but the benefits these would yield are likely to be more modest.

9.2 Recommendations

There are inherent risks with the current status quo, which could affect the credibility of the EQF. The use of 'soft linkage' to the EQF may result in some initiatives using EQF levels that do not adhere to EQF principles of learning outcomes and QA. Moreover, indirect linkages currently result in initiatives that are linked to different EQF levels.

Moreover, the high number of users of international sectoral qualifications, frameworks and standards and their high value in the labour market provides a compelling rationale for intervention to increase the recognition of these initiatives. Consequently, we recommend the European Commission and Member States take action to improve the linkage of initiatives to the EQF.

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations have been formulated:

- **Recommendation 1:** Examine in greater depth the feasibility of creating a direct link between EQF and international sectoral qualifications. There is strong demand from the side of international sectoral organisations to establish a direct linkage with the EQF. This would have implications for the EQF referencing process, however, a comparable set of criteria (like the one for referencing qualifications frameworks/ systems) could be adapted to international sectoral initiatives.

- **Recommendation 2:** The feasibility assessment should examine in greater depth:
  - The position of Member States (as this aspect was not covered by this assignment) and in particular the type of objections put forward by the national authorities and reflecting on how these could be catered for;
  - The criteria for the eligibility of initiatives. There would be merit in opening up this possibility only to initiatives that are sufficiently mature and reach out to a significant number of persons.

- **Recommendation 3:** In case it proves unfeasible to create a procedure for an official direct linkage with EQF, consider the possibility of giving organisations guidance on how to improve the quality of self-declared linkages. As shown by this study, a number of organisations are already referring to EQF levels without having made an official link. It is unlikely that this practice will stop – on the contrary, it is likely to spread as the EQF becomes more and more established. If that tendency continues there would be added value at minimum in giving clear guidance on how such linkages should be established.

- **Recommendation 4:** Alongside efforts to create a direct link between EQF and international sectoral qualifications, the European Commission and EQF Advisory Group should provide common guidance to national authorities for including international sectoral qualifications in NQFs. There will continue to be demand for owners of international sectoral qualifications to link their qualifications to NQFs, as it can provide access to funding and improves the national recognition of qualifications. This process should be largely similar to the processes that national authorities adopt to link national qualifications developed outside formal education and training. These qualifications share many of the same characteristics of international sectoral qualifications, in terms of relevance, use of learning outcomes, quality assurance, etc.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Additional findings from desk research and survey

Figure 14. Number of organisations in charge of different types of initiatives according to desk research
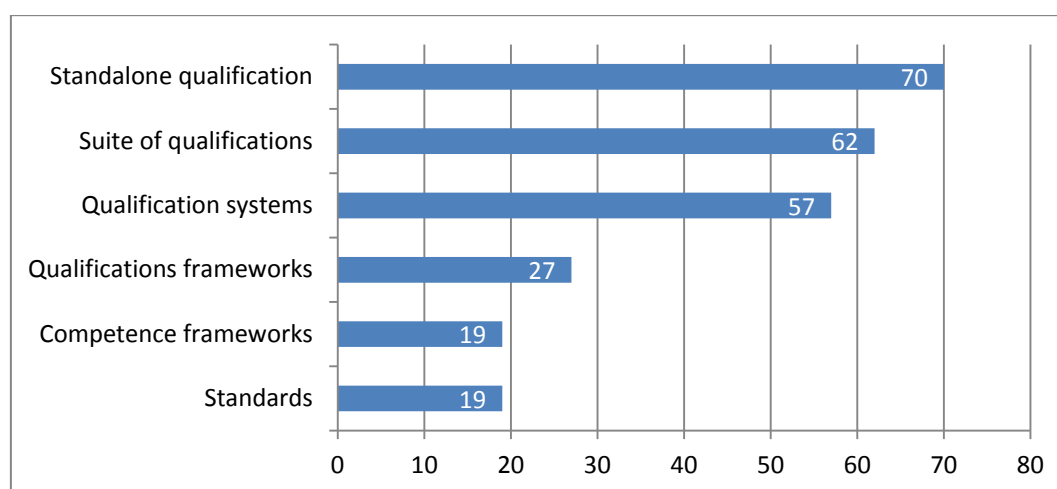
Source: ICF desk research of international sectoral organisations' websites

Table 10. Top 10 sectors covered by the organisations identified by desk research [48]

|	**Count**
Human health and social services activities	30
ICT service activities	29
Arts, entertainment and recreation	26
Scientific and technical activities	17
Construction	16
Finance, insurance and real estate	15
Transportation and storage	12
Personal service -, administrative support service- and security and investigation activities	12
Hospitality and Tourism	10
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishery	10
Other sectors	*49 [49]*

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[48] This data seems to be coherent with data collected through the Survey.
[49] Education 8, Business administration 7, Manufacturing of food, beverages and tobacco 5, Wholesale and retail trade, renting and leasing 4, Energy and water supply, sewerage and waste management 4, Manufacturing of transport equipment 4, Mining and heavy industry 3, Manufacturing of fabricated metal products, except machinery and equipment 3, Public administration and defence and membership organisations 3,

Cross sectoral	*28*

Source: ICF desk research of international sectoral organisations' websites

Figure 15. Type of organisations identified through preliminary desk research (N=254)
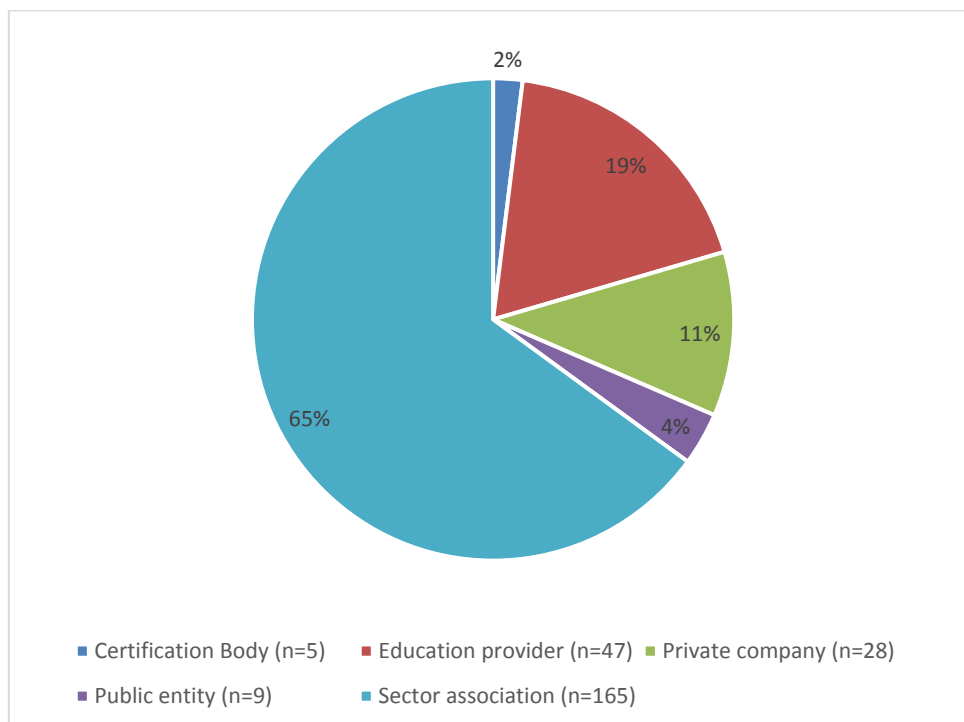
Source: ICF desk research of international sectoral organisations' websites

Manufacturing of electrical equipment, computer, electronic and optical products 2, Manufacturing of Textile, Apparel, Leather, Footwear and related products 2, Manufacturing of consumer goods except food, beverages, tobacco, textile, apparel, leather 2, Manufacturing of machinery and equipment, except electrical equipment 1, Chemical industry 1, Media 0, Wood processing, paper and printing 0

Survey findings

Table 11. Type of initiatives covered under the response 'individual sectoral qualifications'

	Number of ISQs	Percentage (n=65)
Standalone qualification	23	35%
Family of qualifications linked to each other	25	38%
Qualifications standard for one qualification	13	20%
Qualifications standard for several qualifications	3	5%
Other[50]	1	2%

Source: ICF survey of international sectoral organisations
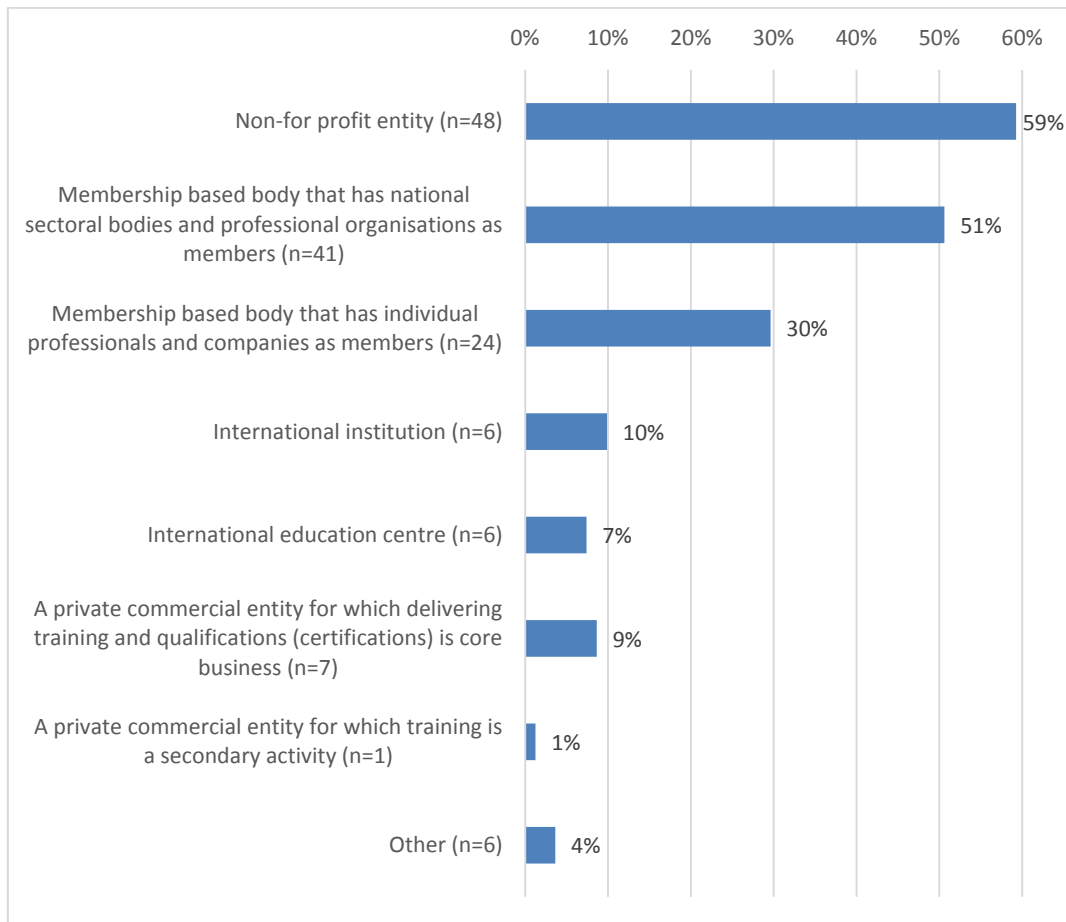
Figure 16. Number of initiatives per sector
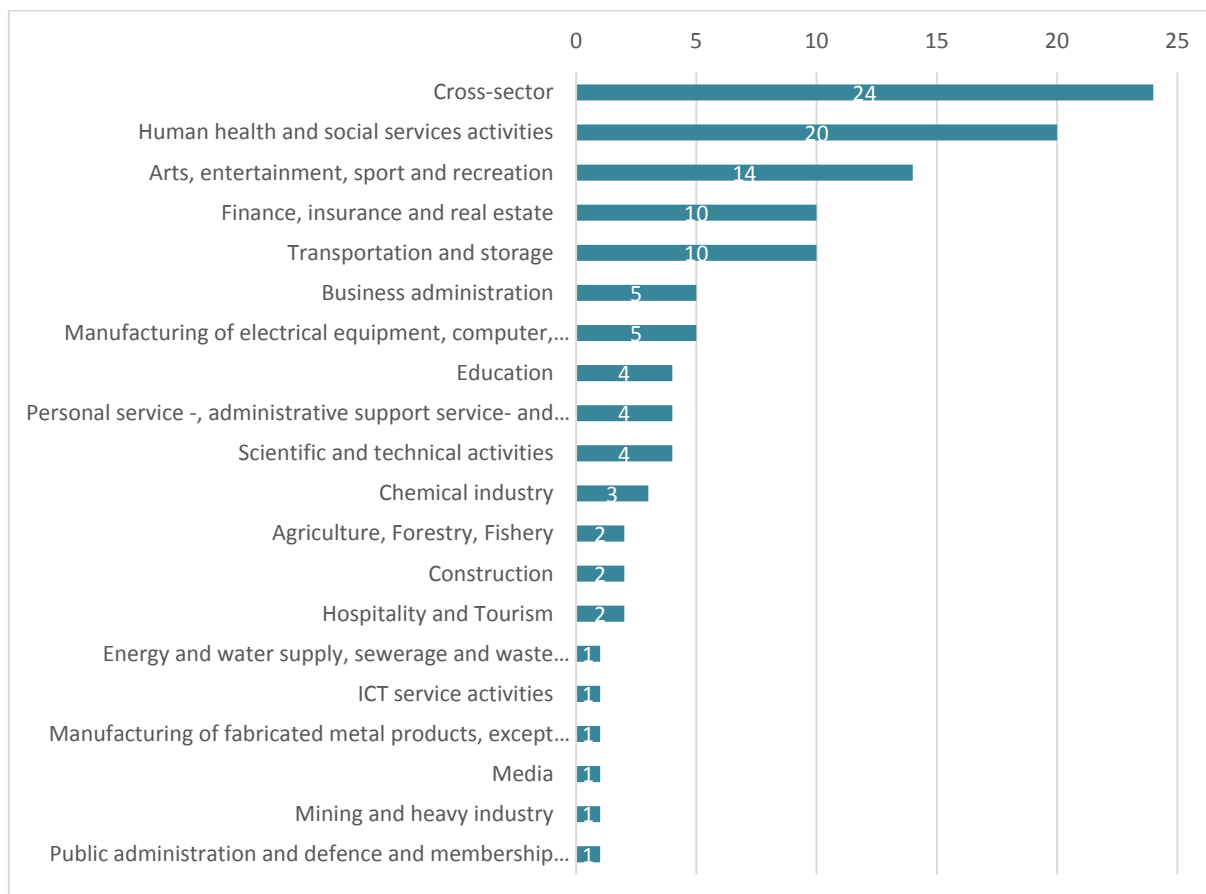
Source: ICF survey of international sectoral organisations

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[50]

Figure 17. Type of organisations (those that said they managed at least one initiative) (N=81)

Source: ICF survey of international sectoral organisations

Annex 2: List of organisations interviewed

Organisation	Name of the initiative
AGROSUP Dijon (Institut National supérieur des sciences agronomiques de l'alimentation et de l'environnement)	Agroforestry Training in Europe (AgroFe): Training and certification for farmers and future farmers (EQF level 3), students and adults (EQF level 4), advisors/tutors (EQF level 5)
Association for All IT Architects (IASA)	IT Architect Certifications - ITAbook competency framework
Association Montessori International (AMI)	AMI Montessori Diplomas and AMI Classroom Assistants Certificates
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) qualifications
Bildungszentren des Baugewerbes e. V. (BZB)	Sectoral Competence Framework for Energy Efficiency and Fire Prevention
Cambridge English Language Assessment (Part of the University of Cambridge)	CELTA and Delta
CEN (Workshop on ICT Skills) & CEPIS (maintenance of communication / webpage)	European e-competences Framework (ecf)
Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (International)	Certificates and Diplomas in International Logistics
Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)	Chartered Management Accountant Competency Framework
Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Qualifications; CIPD Profession map
CIDESCO	CIDESCO DIPLOMA
CISCO	Cisco certifications
Coiffure EU; UNI Hair and Beauty (EU social partners)	European Hairdressing Certificate (EHC)
Confédération Européenne de Volleyball a.s.b.l. (CEV)	World certification of coaching
Confederation of International Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology (CIBTAC)	QCF qualifications
DEKRA Akademie GmbH	Logistics Qualifications Framework
EBC Licencing GmbH	European Business Competence Licence (EBC*L)
ECC Board operating within the	European Care Certificate

EASPD (European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities	
ECDL Foundation	European Computer Driving Licence
EFPA European Financial Planning Association	EFPA Certification
EuropeActive	Fitness Sector Qualifications Framework
European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences (EuCheMS)	European Professional Card for Chemists
European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP)	European Certificate for Psychotherapy (ECP)
European Association of Communication Agencies (EACA)	European Advertising Certificate
European Banking & Financial Services Training Association (EBTN)	EQF FSS Translator
European Building Expert/ EurBE	The Association of European Building Surveyors and Construction Experts
European Center for Leadership and Entrepreneurship Education (ECLEE) which is accredited by The Council for Six Sigma Certification	Lean Six Sigma Certification
European Coaching Federation	European Coaching Licence
European Coast Guard Functions Forum / European Coast Guard Functions Training Network	Sectoral Qualification Framework for Coast Guard Functions, CGFSQF
European Confederation of Outdoor Employers	Certificate for Outdoor Animators
European Equestrian Federation	FEI Coach Education Programme
European Family Therapy Association	European Family Therapy Association's minimum training standards
European Federation for Welding, Joining and Cutting (EWF)	European Federation for Welding, Joining and Cutting's international harmonized system for training, qualification and certification
European Federation of Funeral Services (EFFS)	Funeral Services Master Business Administration (FUSEMBA)
European Federation of National Engineering Associations	EUR-ACE competency framework; EUR ING qualification
European Federation of Nurses (EFN)	EFN Competency Framework
European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA)	EuroPsy: European Certificate in Psychology

European Federation of Radiographer Societies (EFRS)	EFRS EQF level 6 and 7 benchmarking document for radiography education
European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians (EFAD)	European Dietetic (Advanced) Competences
European Financial Certification Organisation	EFICERT SQF (Sectoral Qualifications Framework)
European Handball Federation (EHF)	EHF Master Coach, EHF Referee, EHF Delegate, European handball manager
European Hockey Federation	FIH Coach
European Logistics Association	European Logistics Association certifications
European Marketing Confederation	The European Marketing Confederation Qualification and Certification Framework (EMCQ)
European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)	European Individual Accreditation for coaches (EIA) based on the EMCC Competence Framework (4 levels); European Supervision Individual Accreditation (ESIA) based on the EMCC Supervision Competence Framework (1 level)
European Network of Occupational Safety and Health Organisations	Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Professional Certifications
European Railway Agency	Train driver certificate
European Region of the World Confederation of Physiotherapy (WCPT)	WCPT guideline for physical therapist professional entry level education & Policy Statement on Physiotherapy Education of the ER-WCPT
European Sleep Research Society	Sleep Council Qualifications
European Underwater Federation	EUF Certification (based on standards)
European Union of Medical Specialists (Union Européenne des Médecins Spécialistes – UEMS)	European Specialists Medical Assessment
European Universities on Professionalisation on Humanitarian action (EUPRHA)	Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework (HAQF)
InfoComm International	CTS – Certified Technology Specialist
Institute for Supply Management (ISM)	Certified Professional in Supply Management® (CPSM®) - Certified Professional in Supplier Diversity™ (CPSD™)
Institute of Brewing & Distilling (IBD)	Institute of Brewing & Distilling Qualifications

International Association of Accounting Professionals	International Association of Accounting Professionals Qualifications
International Association of Book-keepers	IAB Qualifications
International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM)	Associate Emergency Manager; Certified Emergency Manager Program
International Association of Tour Managers (IATM)	IATM European Tour Managers Certificate (TMC) / Tour Manager – Tour Guide's Certificate (TMC/TGC)
International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE)	International Sport Coaching & Coach Developer Frameworks, International Coaching Degree Standards
International Council on Systems Engineering (INCOSE)	International Council on Systems Engineering Certifications
IPK europe	Eco-C European communication certificate
Landcommanderij Alden Biesen	InHerit
Medical Dosimetrist Certification Board	Certified Medical Dosimetrist
Microsoft	Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) certification, Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) Certification, Microsoft Technology Associate (MTA)
Natural History Museum London	EUColComp – European Competency Framework for VET in Collections Management
Pearson	Pearson qualifications
Royal Yachting Association	Royal Yachting Association Certificates of Competences and Professional Qualifications
Samaritan International (SAM.I)	European First Aid Certificate
Schulungszentrum Fohnsdorf	Certification for mentors and tutors (Certi.mentu)
Scottish Qualifications Authority	EuroAspire & Aspire2Create
Volkshochschule Mainburg e.V. from Germany (lead partner, but not involved in follow-up project)	CATE – Care Across The European Union
Water Quality Association	WQA Certifications
World Federation for Medical Education (WFME)	World Federation for Medical Education Global Standards

Annex 3: Fiches of initiatives analysed in depth

See separate document.

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