



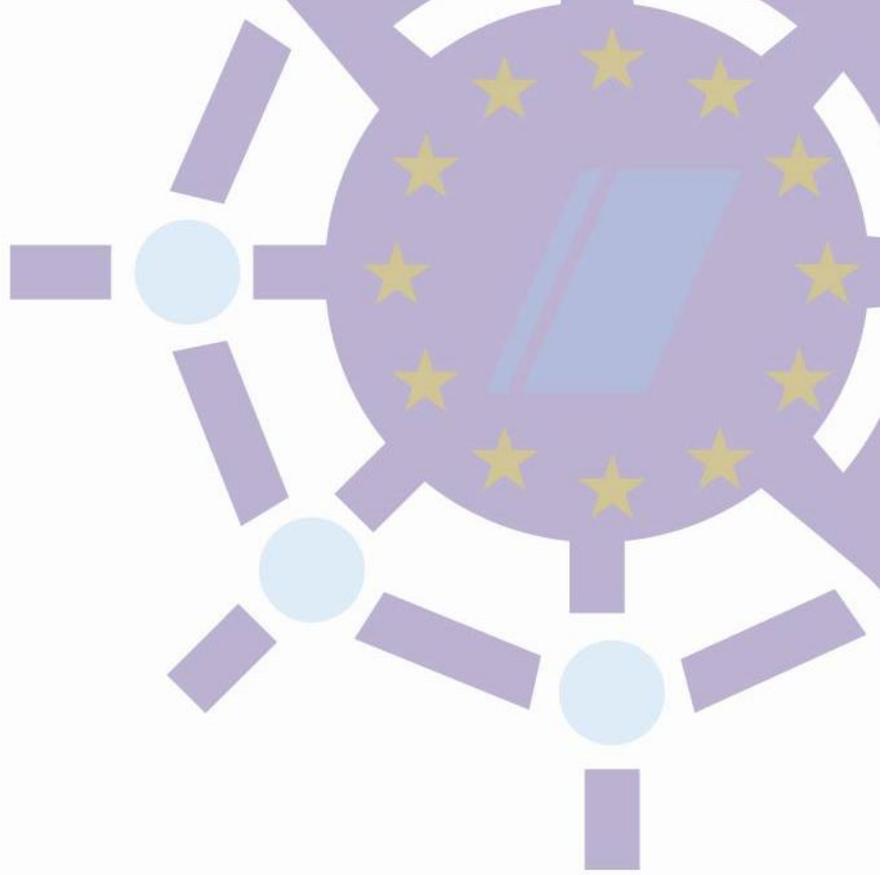
EUROPEAN
COAST GUARD FUNCTIONS
TRAINING NETWORK

**Working Paper for
adoption and management of the
Sectoral Qualifications Framework for
Coast Guard Functions**

**European Coast Guard Functions Academies Network Project
ECGFA NET - PHASE III
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Introduction

This working paper has been drafted in the framework of Work Package 4 (WP4) “*Development of a Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Coast Guard Functions*” (SQFCGF), as part of the European Coast Guard Functions Academy Network - ECGFA NET phase III.¹

According to task 5.2 of WP4 Workplan, a formal document defining the management aspects of the SQFCGF will be prepared and presented, as one of the WP4 outcomes, at the end of the project.²

In order to achieve the abovementioned outcome, this working paper intends to provide an overview on the functioning and management of the qualifications framework and some general guidelines for the establishment of a body entrusted with the future management of the **Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Coast Guard Functions**, and quality assurance requirements following the Recommendations of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)³.

The content of this working paper is based on lessons learned in the past decade regarding the adoption of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks (SQFs), both at European and international level, including their referencing to the EQF. The adoption, governance and management of the SQFCGFs should take into account the peculiarities of the sector, as well as the resources available in order to guarantee its concrete implementation in the future. At this regard, the Coast Guard sector has many specificities related to its complexity both in content (11 functions divided into sub-sectors and activities) and in the institutional framework (highly regulated institutional framework and mixed civilian/military status).

Whilst there is significant and consolidated experience in developing NQFs and referencing to the EQF, there is less experience with SQFs, and still very little experience in SQFs at international and/or European level (ISQFs).

Reference to studies and papers published at European and international level is considered in the drafting of this paper.

1. An overview on the actions needed for the adoption of the SQF

Once the content of the SQFCGF, in terms of learning outcomes, has been shared and approved, the formal launch and adoption of the SQFCGF will require two steps:

1. Drafting a formal document establishing the SQFCGF, its aim and relevant management aspects (hereafter SQFCGF Act, even if this is only a generic and provisional label) in order to ensure a common understanding between the endorsing institutions and to promote further enlargement to other Coast Guard Authorities. This document, e.g. Act,

¹ The Italian Coast Guard, as ECGFA Net partner, was assigned the leadership of Work Package 4.

² For further information on WP4 <http://ecgff-trainingportal.eu/pages/38-what-is-cgfsqf-and-its-purpose>.

³ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, *OJ C 111*, 6.5.2008. Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, *OJEU C189/15 del 15.06.2017*

Memorandum of Understanding, Protocol, Statement of Intent or Joint Declaration should address the following aspects:

- setting the main principles and objectives of the SQFCGF;
- identifying the SQFCGF content and its visual identity;
- defining administrative management aspects such as an Apex body, quality assurance mechanisms, dissemination and review process;
- the process for admission of new adhering organisations (e.g. requirements, how to apply, which information should be provided, who decides upon admission etc.);
- the kind of support requested by the adhering organisations, in terms of technical/material input, participation in events and eventual financial resources;
- the timing, mechanism and/or principles for periodic content review (these can be included in the establishing Act or managed operationally at level of Apex body/working groups).

2. Adoption of the SQFCGF by Organisations with Coast Guard Functions.

The adoption of the SQFCGF would require an endorsement of the above-mentioned document by the adhering organisations, along with:

- mentioning the awarding institutes and training centres in the field of the Coast Guard Functions at national level;
- providing an updated list of sectoral stakeholders, in order to maintain a continuous dialogue with all the interested parties;
- identifying the representatives/points of contact of the adhering organisations.

In addition, two further key elements are:

- a quality assurance protocol, outlining quality assurance mechanisms;
- recommendations for facilitating the implementation of sectoral NQF(s) consistent with the SQFCGF.

According to the WP4 Workplan, these two further key elements are the expected outcomes respectively of task no. 4 *“drafting quality assurance elements/guidelines”* and task no. 6 *“dissemination strategy and NQF recommendations”*.⁴

2. Focus on the governance and management

One of the main issues related to the implementation of the SQFCGF is to define how the SQFCGF will be governed and managed.

The *governance* involves the setting of the strategic direction and steering policies. A specific body should be identified for the governance, whose arrangements will take into account the

⁴ WP4, together with the ECGFA Net Project leader, will evaluate if integrating these documents in the SQFCGF Act or keep them separately.

peculiarities of the SQFCGF. In addition, governance implies two further actions of: 1) coordinating relevant strategies across countries; 2) ensuring an adequate involvement of stakeholders⁵.

The *management* involves the implementation of agreed policy(ies)/strategy(ies), carried out by executive officers with specific expertise in training and SQFs. The officers will be accountable to the body setting the governance.

Previous experience in the field of SQF management⁶ shows that the formalisation of a qualifications framework is much easier in the presence of already existing agencies or supranational bodies. Different and more structured or empowered bodies can always be established in later stages of the development of the process, when there is more awareness and/or evidence on what the SQF is, or should be.

3. Identification of an Apex Body and relevant tasks

A formal body, or at a minimum a formal venue, for dialogue among the various actors that have participated in, or supported the initiative to develop the SQF needs to be identified in order to adopt, manage and maintain the SQF, as well as to support and coordinate relevant activities for preserving an efficient and credible instrument.

The Apex body should conduct the following tasks:

- setting the strategic priorities for implementing and maintaining SQF;
- management of the qualifications framework;
- standards development;
- development and implementation of procedures for the periodical review of the SQF;
- consultation of relevant stakeholders;
- dissemination of public information and outreach activities.

However, considering that sustaining a qualifications framework is a process, as it is not a fixed instrument, and can present peculiarities based on the features of the sector, the set of tasks and the level of commitment assigned to the Apex body may vary and be further agreed upon, particularly in the context of other EU and international initiatives.

The Apex body can be supported by other structures holding administrative, managerial and/or consultative roles, such as the equivalent of the National Points of Contact or the Advisory Group for the EQF, as well as a technical secretariat for more operational issues.

The Apex body should be in contact with all of the involved national authorities (e.g. managing Coast Guard Functions in our specific case) and register every relevant update, in order to ensure the transparency and usefulness of the SQF, as a dynamic and inclusive tool for cooperation.

⁵ An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks: Conceptual and Practical Issues for Policy Makers, Ron Tuck, International Labour Organization 2007

⁶ Unesco (2017). Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks. Vol. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/2221>

At the same time, the Apex body does not have any direct responsibility or power in respect of qualifications development, issue of certifications, quality assurance of providers or the assessment of national qualifications.

Given the above, and that a unique European body that is in charge to coordinate all Coast Guard Functions does not exist, this role is distributed among different EU Agencies (e.g. EFCA, EMSA, Frontex). This situation is also reflected at national level, where Coast Guard functions are often carried out by different national authorities, and even a single coast guard function may be performed by more than one authority⁷. Hence, it would be advisable that EU Agencies (such as FRONTEX, EFCA, EMSA, etc.) and the national organisations with Coast Guard functions responsibilities are all considered as key actors/stakeholders for the CGFSQF.

It is also worth mentioning that:

- the European Coast Guard Functions Forum (ECGFF) represents a voluntary, independent and apolitical cross-function cooperation framework created “*to study, contribute to and promote understanding and development on maritime issues of common interest related to CGF across borders and sectors*”⁸. Although the ECGFF does not have the same powers and responsibilities of a formal legal body⁹, since 2009 it has involved most of the EU and Schengen maritime countries, it has gathered numerous organisations with coast guard functions and has been a venue where all the Coast Guard Functions have been represented. In addition, the ECGFF is the place where the idea to develop a Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Coast Guard Functions was initiated in 2014 and the ECGFA-Net project was developed by a consortium of ECGFF members. Therefore the work done by ECGFA-Net within the ECGFF and the experience gained in this domain should be considered as the basis to define next steps.
- As a result of the work done within the ECGFA Net project (phases I, II and III) a Training Network, namely the European Coast Guard Functions Training Network, has been set up, and is now a unique cross-function and cross-sectoral training network in the framework of Coast Guard functions cooperation. One of the Training Network’s tasks is to “*contribute to the development of a SQFCGF*”.
- During the last two years, the EU Agencies; EFCA, EMSA and Frontex, have increased their roles in relation to European Coast Guard cooperation, as part of the European Coast Guard and Border package, adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2016. Their involvement to support national organizations with coast guard functions has been remarkable. In addition, these 3 agencies have been involved with and consulted by the ECGFA Net project, as part of WP4, in the development of the SQFCGF.

Hence, a comprehensive and cooperative framework involving the European Coast Guard Functions Forum, the Training Network and the EU Agencies with Coast Guard Functions (namely EFCA, EMSA and Frontex, working together on specific sectors under their Tripartite Working Arrangement) seems to be the most appropriate place to locate the governance and the management of the SQFCGF and to act as Apex Body.

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/modes/maritime/studies/doc/2014-06-icf-coastguard.pdf>

⁸ Reference to ECGFF terms of reference

⁹ Such as the EU Commission with regard to EQF or Frontex with regard to SQF for border guarding,

4. A reference frame for the Apex Body and major components

Based on published evidence in the field of qualifications frameworks, the management of the SQFCGF is dependent upon on how the following major components are defined:

- tasks of the Apex body(ies);
- composition of the Apex body and other technical/support structures, if any;
- functioning;
- funding;
- activities and outputs.

It is important to take into account that there is not a single regulated way to manage a qualifications framework. As such, there could be different options for each of the above-mentioned dimensions.

According to the final report of Work Package 4 of ECGFA Net I, the identification of an Apex Body and its main features must take into consideration and be consistent with the aim and objectives for which the SQFCGF has been created and also the peculiarities of Coast Guard functions sector, both at national and European level ¹⁰.

4.1 Tasks of the Apex body

The tasks of the Apex body can range from strategic and political roles to operational management ones.

The strategic and policy tasks should relate to:

- setting needs, aims and priorities related to the SQF, taking into account training policies and systems;
- defining the SQF governance and management structure (e.g. establishment of sectoral commissions, criteria for selecting the members of sectoral commissions, definition of sub-sectors within a sectoral qualification);
- overseeing the implementation of the SQF and checking the consistency with sectoral policies, priorities and needs;
- defining and overseeing quality assurance mechanisms;
- defining and overseeing the recommendations for adopting the SQF;
- promoting cooperation with European, International, National and sectoral agencies on policy and sectoral issues;
- ensuring adequate involvement of stakeholders;
- reviewing the SQF.

¹⁰ <http://ecgff-trainingportal.eu/uploads/store/librarydoc/33/file/004a59be47.pdf>

The management tasks should encompass:

- ensuring that qualifications referenced to the SQF are subject to a quality-checking process;
- promoting dissemination and stakeholders' involvement initiatives based on priorities set at the strategic level;
- adopting instructions and guidelines for the work of sectoral commissions/working groups;
- coordinating the work of sectoral commissions/WGs;
- providing inputs to oversee the implementation of the SQF;
- providing training or advisory support to relevant authorities or other stakeholders.

Tasks can be shared between more than one single Apex body, according to the type of task (political/executive/technical). In this case, there will be a multi-layer governance structure.

The identification of different bodies could be based on sectoral specialization or Coast Guard functions. However, this may give rise to a fragmented governance structure as each body could implement a mix of policy, executive and technical activities but with sectoral/functional specialisation.

When more than one body is entrusted with strategic functions, coordination is needed (e.g. through an Advisory Group or a rotating Presidency) in order to ensure consistency. Lessons learned from EQF show that starting with more basic functions (e.g. coordination and provision of general guidelines) ensures efficiency as it permits the start-up of the process, raises awareness, achieves results and thus increases motivation.

A broader and more ambitious approach permits the setting of far-reaching priorities and long term objectives. This may facilitate the cooperation with other European/international bodies involved in skills development, support to mobility and transparency, development of training and quality assurance.

In order to support the operational management, secretariat structures can be established (e.g. the Bologna Follow Up Group Secretariat).

In addition, management tasks and support to strategic functions can be assigned to working groups.

Analysing the tasks of the Apex body, other categories of responsibilities are offered here in order to enable an approach which is most consistent with the state of the art of the Coast Guard functions.

- **Administrative-oriented apex body.** This refers to the focus on activities which have administrative implications, such as recognition of qualifications, credits, links with EQF and NQF, quality certification, etc.
- **Policy-oriented apex body.** This refers to the focus on more general recommendations and implications.

4.2 Functioning of the Apex Body

Decisions should be made regarding the functioning of the Apex body. These include, *inter alia*:

- how and how often the strategic decisions are taken (ex. adoption of a Work Plan and related time frame);
- the working methods (e.g. meetings, exchange of documents, e-platforms, plenary meetings, restricted meetings);
- the range of instruments to be adopted (e.g. recommendations, guidelines, working papers);
- the frequency of the meetings;
- how decisions are taken (e.g. majority of votes, unanimity, silent consensus);
- if the Apex body should have a fixed/dedicated premises or be hosted by members on a rotating basis;
- if an external body should be appointed to perform quality checks on the functioning of the body;
- relationship with members/national authorities or “national points of contact”.

Some of the above-mentioned tasks and activities may be intended as “modular”: they can be enriched over time, especially in relation to the maturity in adopting and implementing the qualifications framework. Ideally, all of the above should be included in an internal regulation to be approved by the body or participating authorities.

4.3 Equipment of the Apex Body

Based on the tasks and activities to be implemented, decisions regarding the human and technical resources to be allocated to the Apex body should be quantified. If the Apex body or other technical structures have operational/managerial roles, they might need specific equipment, such as platforms, web portal and data bases.

4.4 Nature and composition of the Apex Body

The composition of the Apex body is strictly related to its tasks and should be as representative as possible. Representation can be based on geographical (countries and regions) or sectoral (Coast Guard functions) factors, or other dimensions (e.g. cultural, professional etc.), or a mix of the above.

Considering the number of representatives/organisations involved in the Apex body, an organizational structure should be defined in order to set its leadership. This can be made following a formal (consultative) appointment process or a rotating appointment between the organizations participating into the Body. A mix of the two can be also adopted by deciding for an appointment from a “shortlist” which can be created in order to assure that all the participating organisations/countries have the opportunity to take the leadership.

The Apex body can be an existing institution/agency or forum or a new ad-hoc appointed organisation. Based on lesson learnt from previous experience, a venue for the adoption, management and maintaining of the SQFCGF can be created and later replaced or enhanced by more formalized structures dealing with specific aspects (i.e. link to the EQF or integration into NQF, quality assurance, etc.).

The Apex body can be also established in the form of a consultative, voluntary forum without a defined structure or implementing regulation.

The responsibility to govern the SQFCGF, once it is drafted, can be also attributed to existing (EU) agencies or bodies or foundations.

4.5 Funding/financial sustainability

The budget for the functioning of the Apex body depends on the defined structure, the management and governance setting and the number of tasks and activities to be implemented.

Co-funding for the future development and management of the SQFCGF could be requested to the EU Commission or other relevant EU Institution, in consideration of the huge added value that this initiative would bring to the European Union and its integration process.

Additional funding can be obtained by charging “fees” for services, e.g. the download of documents, registration to platform(s), participation to training initiatives and events. The analysis of experiences relevant to already existing international sectoral qualifications framework can provide examples to this purpose (see Annex). However, this could also be viewed as a barrier to adoption and thwart the benefits of the SGFCGF

5. The resources needed to start up the SQFCGF

In order to start up the SQFCGF two major issues can be identified:

- Supporting the establishment of the SQFCGF and its related periodic updating process; this in view of strengthening the transparency of Coast Guard qualifications, as well as facilitating interoperability of dedicated personnel and identify minimum quality standards and good practice in the European Union.
- Supporting the availability of a web platform that allows the collection of information about education and training provision from different sources existing at national and EU levels.

As regards the first issue, the following activities should be considered:

1. Draft the establishing Act, setting: aims, definitions, roles, priorities, activities, resources, budget related to the management of the SQF;
2. Give operational guidelines to be used for describing and referencing qualifications to the SQFCGF;
3. Governance of the process of implementation, maintenance and updating of the SQFCGF, quality assurance checks and periodic reports;
4. Encourage the development of national SQFs.

The Apex body is also asked to strengthen the communication and dissemination activities across EU in order to stimulate a debate on SQFCGF matters (e.g.: referencing, levelling, learning outcomes, competences validation, quality assurance, etc.). The dissemination activities will involve public authorities, social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance and awarding bodies. The dissemination and communication processes will focus on the creation of a learning network with partners/stakeholders involved in skills and qualifications activities both at national and EU levels.

To achieve this goal, the Apex body representatives can participate in the following activities:

1. Working Groups;
2. Framework reviews;
3. Learning meetings;
4. Study visits;
5. Conferences, workshops and meetings;

It is not possible to make a detailed estimation of the resources required to start up the SQFCGF and manage it. The estimation is even harder in consideration on the number of open issues and possibilities indicated in the previous paragraphs. However, a tentative list of costs connected with the management of SQFCGF can include the following:

Table 1 Potential input to start up the SQFCGF

Variables	Inputs required	
Tasks of the Apex body	<p><u><i>In the case of "Policy-oriented Apex body"</i></u></p> <p>This kind of Apex body doesn't require a dedicated structure/premises and doesn't require dedicated full-time personnel.</p> <p>Considering the more general tasks, the cost for 2/3 meetings per year should be planned.</p>	<p><u><i>In the case of "Administrative-oriented Apex body"</i></u></p> <p>This solution is more expensive because the needs of dedicated personnel, structures and headquarter.</p> <p>At the same time, should these tasks assigned to an existing (EU) Agency, the running costs can be paid directly from the EU budget, or divided somehow, perhaps an affiliation fee or something similar, among the participating organisations.</p>
Composition of the Apex body and other technical/support structures	<p>The running costs depend on how large and articulated the composition of the Apex body is and the composition of its consultative/advisory/working groups.</p> <p>For example, the Bologna process and the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) the EU provides a small, dedicated budget for the Secretariat of the BFUG, which cover the staff costs and the participation by the adhering organisations to its works. At the same time, the country holding the</p>	

	Presidency of the Secretariat of the BFUG finances the running costs of the BFUG with its own national budget and each organisation covers the expenses for their own participation at event/meeting/activity.		
Functioning and equipment of the Apex body	<p><u><i>In the case that the Apex body is embedded into an (existing) EU Agency.</i></u></p> <p>The larger and more operational functions and the more frequent the meetings, the higher are the cost for maintaining the SQFCGF.</p>	<p><u><i>In the case that the Apex body is a new – ad hoc body.</i></u></p> <p>These costs could be paid by the EU budget, at no cost for participating countries, or can be borne pro-quota by participating countries/organisations setting a structured, physical and stable premise.</p>	<p><u><i>In the case that the Apex body is a “virtual venue” hosted by countries/agencies/organisations on a rotating basis</i></u></p> <p>In case of a virtual venue, it is likely that the hosting agency/organisation/ country participate with its own budget and the participants contribute in kind with their personnel.</p>

Table 2 Tentative list of direct costs to start up the SQFCGF

<u>Cost heading</u>	<u>Cost category</u>
Staff	Management, administration, secretariat, accounting, other staff
Travel and subsistence	Travel, accommodation, meals, transports, other reimbursements
Services	External expertise, information, dissemination, translations, publications, specific evaluation, other services
Equipment	Web platform, equipped working rooms (computer, printer, scanner, phone system, internet connection, security system, etc...), furniture (desk, chair, lamps, magazines...), supplies (stationery, pens, pencils, etc...) promotional material (leaflets, gadgets, etc)

ANNEX: LESSONS LEARNED, CASE STUDIES, STATE OF THE ART IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EQF, NQFs AND SQFs

The functioning and the relevance of the EQF meta-framework

The EQF is the most important overarching framework for qualification frameworks at both European and international level, as it is wide in scope and covers the entire span of qualifications from those achieved at the end of compulsory education to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional or vocational education and training. Each level should in principle be attainable by way of a variety of education and career paths.

The EQF aims to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications¹¹. The EQF has been a source of inspiration for the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks throughout the world. An increasing number of countries and regions are seeking closer links between their qualifications framework and the EQF.

Based on the Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 23 April 2008, the EQF was set up as a common reference framework of qualifications, expressed as learning outcomes and aimed at increasing levels of proficiency. This approach shifts the focus from the former traditional system which emphasises 'learning inputs', such as the length of a learning experience, or type of institution. It also encourages lifelong learning by promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The EQF allows qualifications from different countries to be compared easily. This is achieved by supporting the use of learning outcomes for each qualification, in order to make them more transparent and easier to understand. In this way, the EQF supports the cross-border mobility of learners and workers, and promotes lifelong learning and professional development across Europe.

The EQF Recommendation was recently revised¹² in order to ensure clarity, continuity as well as a further deepening of the EQF.

Given that the EQF is a meta-framework and a translation tool, qualifications are not directly referenced to the EQF¹³. They are referenced to a National Qualification Framework (NQF), where their level and value abroad can be understood through the NQF reference to the eight EQF levels.

Each country wanting to relate its national qualifications levels to the EQF has to prepare a detailed referencing report that follows the ten EQF referencing criteria agreed in Annex III to the revised EQF Recommendation. The referencing criteria should ensure that NQFs are referenced to the EQF in a coherent and transparent way. The criteria assists the structuring of referencing

¹¹ The European Qualifications Framework: supporting learning, work and cross-border mobility, Publications Office of the European Union, 2018

¹² Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2017.189.01.0015.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2017:189:FULL

¹³ Within the context of the EU, policies and actions in relation to skills and qualifications (except for those giving access to regulated professions) are based on Articles 165 (education) and 166 (vocational training) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. Both articles make it clear that EU action relates to encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting their education and training systems, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

reports, which should include input and written statements from national quality assurance bodies and international experts¹⁴.

While the EQF has been consistently revised to remain relevant, the instrumentality of the EQF versus the development of human capital and employability has been recently emphasised. A new Skills Agenda for Europe, adopted by the Commission on 10 June 2016¹⁵, launched **10 actions to make the right training, skills and support available** to people in the EU. The goals and actions of the Agenda are set out in Communication: A New Skills Agenda for Europe.

This agenda recognizes that current and future skills needs vary across different sectors of the economy. With the pace of technological change, a major challenge for industry is to better anticipate and manage the transformative change with regard to skills requirements.

Many sectoral - and regional - initiatives to promote skills have been launched, involving public and private bodies and organisations. But these projects often remain fragmented and their impact on the education and training system is limited. Therefore, a strategic approach is needed that addresses well-defined markets and sectoral skills needs. Sectoral skills cooperation can usefully be linked to growth strategies for the sectors concerned, and backed-up by political commitment and stakeholder involvement at EU, national and regional levels.

Sectoral skills partnerships, in industry and services, will be set up at EU level and then rolled out at national (or, when relevant, regional) level to:

- translate sectoral strategies for the next 5-10 years into identification of skills needs and development of concrete solutions, such as joint development of higher vocational education and training (VET) opportunities and business-education-research partnerships;
- support, where relevant, agreements on the recognition of sectoral qualifications and certifications.

The blueprint initially focused in 6 sectors: automotive, maritime technology, space, defence, textile and tourism. Additional areas (construction, steel, health, green technologies and renewable energies) were addressed in a second wave of implementation that started in 2017.

While the industry sectoral qualification blueprints exercise is more linked to market rather than institutional/public functions needs, the work implemented with regard to sectoral qualifications can be taken as reference for the development of the SQFCGF as it stresses the importance to follow a strategic approach to anticipate the training and qualification needs, as well as to cooperate to implement sectoral policies.

¹⁴ As reported by CEDEFOP (www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf), by April 2018, 35 countries had formally linked ('referenced') their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales). The remaining countries are expected to follow in 2018, which means that the first stage of EQF referencing is nearly finished.

¹⁵ Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions A New Skills Agenda For Europe Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness, COM/2016/0381 final

The EQF Management and Governance structure

When establishing the EQF, the Recommendations of 2008 also foresaw the establishment of a management body responsible for providing overall coherence and promoting transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework.

The EQF Advisory Group was set up in 2008 to ensure overall coherence and promote transparency and trust in the process of referencing. Its role was confirmed by the 2017 Recommendation.

The group is chaired by the European Commission and composed of national representatives (two per Member State and for each of the other 11 participating countries), labour market actors, education and training and civil society representatives, as well as the Council of Europe.

The Advisory Group meets three or four times per year and has been responsible for the development of guidelines and procedures to be followed by member states when referencing their education levels in various attempts to develop mutual trust between them.

The EQF advisory group is supported by the expertise of two sectoral European agencies; the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

Cedefop is one of the EU decentralised agencies founded to support the European Commission, EU Member States and the social partners in the development of European vocational education and training (VET). Cedefop has played a key role in all EQF activities since initial work started in 2004. It has carried out a number of comparative studies and analysis on issues related to the implementation of the framework at EU, national and sectoral level. It cooperates closely with the European Commission and the Member States and provides technical and analytical support to the EQF Advisory Group.

The **ETF** was established to help transition and developing countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training, and labour market systems, in the context of EU external relations policies. The ETF collaborates on a country-specific as well as multi-country basis, building frameworks for continuity in policy and promoting the design of evidence-based policy and implementation.

The group discusses each referencing report in detail and provides feedback to the presenting countries. The presentation and discussion of the reports is intended to improve understanding of NQFs and systems between countries participating in the EQF implementation. The aim of this process is to arrive at a realistic understanding of NQFs and their link to the EQF, as well as qualifications included in the NQF and quality assurance mechanisms.

In this peer review process, EQF members play the role of ‘critical friends’ and help colleagues from other countries to present their systems and qualifications in a transparent way.

A country has referenced to the EQF once the EQF Advisory Group considers its referencing report to be sufficiently transparent and respect all 10 EQF referencing criteria. If the Advisory Group

does not find the report and the explanations given satisfactory, the country will be asked to provide clarifications or to submit a revised report during another EQF Advisory Group meeting.

In addition to the Advisory Group, there are other key implementation structures, as follows:

- **National coordination points (NCPs)** are responsible for more practical issues and ensure that country-specific issues are raised, as well as the application of EQF recommendations and principles are properly applied in the NQFs.
- **Support/working groups** focusing on specific themes, such as quality assurance, sector qualifications, etc. The participation to the WG is based on voluntary contributions by partner countries. The WG often constitutes a peer learning forum for exchanging experience on the development of NQFs in the countries that participate in the EQF process.

Both the NCP and the WG represent effective tools to tie the EQF to NQFs and to build trust.

The functioning of the framework of qualifications for the EHEA (EHEA-QF)

The overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area¹⁶ sets the parameters within which the countries of the European Higher Education Area will develop their national qualifications frameworks. Qualifications frameworks are intended to be an instrument that helps learners as well as those who develop higher education programmes and the competent national authorities¹⁷.

The EHEA Framework was adopted by the Bergen Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in May 2005. It covers higher education qualifications and it is defined around the concept of three cycles (undergraduate, graduate and doctoral studies).

It is an overarching framework comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.

The EHEA-QF has been developed within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), established as a result of the (on-going) Bologna process after the Bologna Declaration of June 1999. The Bologna process is an intergovernmental cooperation of 48 European countries in the field of higher education, and namely the internationalisation of higher education.

In the last two decades, the Bologna process has contributed to structural reforms and promoted the development, adoption and implementation of instruments and tools aiming at facilitating fair recognition of foreign qualifications and/or study periods abroad, such as, the **ENIC and NARIC networks**, the **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)** and the **Diploma Supplement (DS)**.

¹⁶ The framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area - May 2005 http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/WG_Frameworks_qualification/85/2/Framework_qualificationsforEHEA-May2005_587852.pdf

¹⁷ Bologna Working Group. (2005) A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Bologna Working Group Report on Qualifications Frameworks (Copenhagen, Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation)

The EHEA-QFs together with the **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG)** are also tools for implementing the Bologna Process.

Compared to EQF, that was adopted 3 years later, the EHEA-QF is valid for all 48 members of the European Higher Education Area, whether these are members of the European Union or not. It provides the framework within which the national qualifications frameworks in these countries will be developed as far as their higher education qualifications are concerned, and it represents the “face” of European higher education qualifications towards the rest of the world.

Notwithstanding the fact that EQF does not use the same wording for the EHEA-QF higher education qualifications in the framework. They are not conflicting, and indeed the last three EQF levels – levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively – have been made compatible to the three cycles – the first, second and third cycles respectively – of the EHEA-QF of the Bologna Process: the qualifications belonging to such cycles/levels are thus compatible between themselves on the basis of common descriptors – the EQF learning results on one side, and the Dublin Descriptors for the Bologna Process.

When developing their NQFs, countries are called to reference their qualifications, whenever relevant, to both the EQF and the EHEA-QF.

The relation between the EQF and the EHEA-QF is the most important and evident example on how different frameworks, including overarching framework can coexist with overlapping areas. It also permits us to understand that while providing common reference framework to make qualifications more comparable, consistent and labour-market oriented at supra-national level, the need to develop sectoral/regional QF also relates to other specific needs and serves specific purposes.

The governance, management and functioning of the EHEA

The higher strategic and political engine of the EHEA is the Ministerial Conference which comprises (ministerial) representatives from all the EHEA members and is held every two years. Ministers decide at Ministerial Conferences about the central aspects of the EHEA, including its further developments and commitments by its member countries. The Ministerial Conference also decides on new applications for membership to the EHEA as well as any other main changes to the process.

A communiqué is adopted at each Ministerial Conference that outlines decisions taken by the Ministers.

In order to ensure the implementation of the steps upon which the Ministers have decided, the EHEA makes use of several support structures:

- Bologna Follow-Up Group – BFUG;
- BFUG Board;
- BFUG Secretariat;
- Working Groups and Bologna Seminars.

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences. BFUG membership is based on the membership of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

To become a member of the EHEA, countries have to be party to the European Cultural Convention and to declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education.¹⁸

Every two years, the BFUG defines a work plan, which indicates priorities as well as other management or organisational settings. The BFUG meetings play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the ministerial Communiqués as well as in developing the Bologna Process. The BFUG is entrusted with:

- preparing the Ministerial Conferences, policy forums;
- overseeing the Bologna Process between Ministerial Conferences;
- and taking forward matters that do not need to be decided by the Ministers or that have been delegated by the Ministers.

The BFUG has the possibility to set up **working groups to deal with specific topics** in more detail and, also, receives input from **Bologna Seminars**. All Groups within the Work Plan are open to participation from BFUG members, experts nominated by national authorities, consultative members and international experts proposed by the group.

The BFUG decides on the Terms of References of different Groups and decides which of the recommendations of those Groups will be proposed to the Ministers. If it deems necessary, the BFUG may also provide an opportunity for all members and consultative members to express their views on the recommendations and reports.

In addition, a Bologna Policy Forum was introduced in 2009 to enlarge the dialogue and include contributions with participants at ministerial level, with stakeholders or civil servants, from EHEA countries and countries that are not party to the European Cultural Convention, policy dialogue on specific topics (such as mobility, quality assurance, recognition, student involvement, governance etc.) or on higher education reforms in general, making full use of existing EU and UNESCO initiatives. The Bologna policy forum is organized together with the Ministerial Conference.

The Ministerial Conference is not considered a governing body for the EHEA, however, the evaluation and updating of the EHEA-QF is promoted during the BFUG meetings and working groups.

The composition of the “leadership board” of the BFUG, Secretariat and working groups is based on a voluntary and rotating basis. The composition changes every two years, when a new communique setting priorities is agreed. Each body includes a Presidency/Chair and one or two co-chairs or deputies.

¹⁸ European cultural convention, Treaty open for signature by the member States and for accession by European States which are not member States since Paris, 19/12/1954. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/018>

Lessons learned from the adoption of the NQFs in Europe

In 2018, Cedefop published research on the latest NQF developments describing how 43 NQFs in 39 countries participating in the EQF implementation, including 28 EU Member States, are structured and how national qualifications have been referenced to NQF levels and linked to EQF¹⁹.

Some of the results are summarized below, as they can offer a background of evidence on how the NQFs are perceived and applied at practical, national level: which may be partially different from the intentions driving the adoption of overarching/transnational QFs.

The following characteristics of European NQFs can be identified:

1. The majority of countries are working towards comprehensive frameworks, addressing all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training (vocational education and training (VET), higher education, general education) and, in some cases, opening up to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training.
2. The comprehensive frameworks dominating in Europe can be understood as 'loose' in the sense that they integrate sub-frameworks (and their specific legislation) but refrain from introducing uniform rules for the design and award of qualifications. They have been designed to embrace a multiplicity of education and training institutions and provisions, reflecting a broad range of values, traditions and interests. Loose frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive level descriptors to be applied across subsystems but allow, at the same time, substantial 'differentiation' within and between sub-frameworks.
3. While the learning outcomes approach is broadly accepted across Europe it is being interpreted and applied in many different ways (Cedefop, 2016). Evidence shows, that most countries combine this with inputs and emphasise that they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.
4. The main objective of the new European frameworks is to improve transparency and enhance lifelong learning. This is a simpler and more immediate objective to achieve rather than structural reform. However, the study highlights that as NQFs move towards operational status, countries increasingly tend to see NQFs as contributing to incremental reform, leading to an expectation that NQFs can and should shape policies and practices in qualifications and skills.
5. While technical and conceptual design is important, creating commitment and ownership of the process, stakeholder buy-in, consensus building and overcoming resistance to change have been identified as critical conditions for effective NQF development and implementation in Europe. Although a broad range of stakeholders participate, NQFs have so far mainly addressed the needs of education and training, and, to a lesser extent, those of the labour market.
6. Sustainability and visibility to end-users are two further important conditions for impact. The stronger the political mandate and its integration into mainstream policy processes, the greater its potential as a policy steering and reform tool.

¹⁹ Cedefop (2018). *National qualifications framework developments in Europe 2017*. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

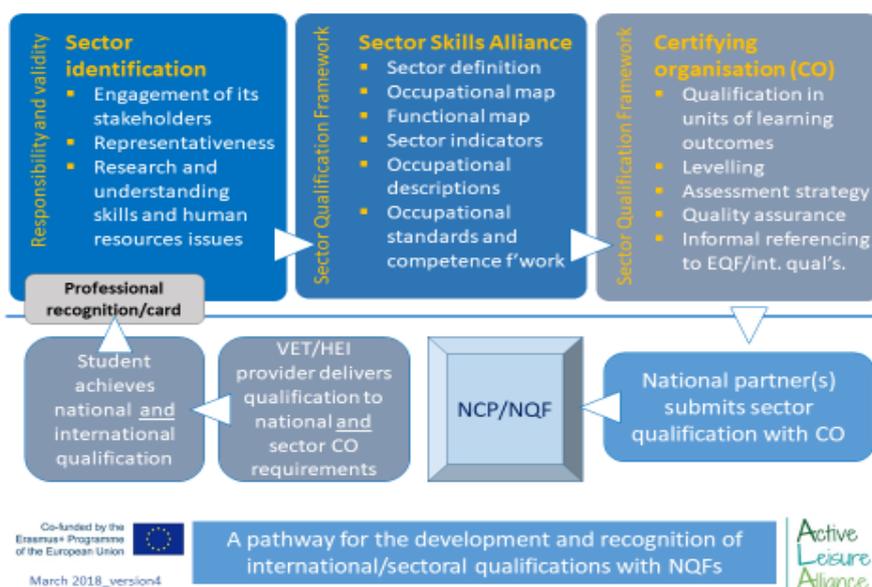
Lessons learned from the adoption of the Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks

Even if the bottom-up impulse cannot be ignored, the priority in developing sectoral qualification frameworks in Europe has been given to sectors:

- which represent the drivers of future economic development, and thus the source for future employment
- in which there is a rather low level of professional qualification and a missing "learning" culture in the branch;
- related to the safety and security of European citizens and people, including in the so-called regulated professions.

Indeed, while a number of initiatives and projects focusing on the vocational training schemes and defining a job/qualification profile for this occupation that describes skills, knowledge and competencies (compatible with the EQF) have been implemented, very limited experience is available regarding the adoption of SQFs.

One example of European Sectoral qualification standard is the one developed within the Active Leisure Alliance²⁰. The proposed pathway **for the development and recognition of international/sectoral qualifications with NQFs developed under this initiative is represented below:**



The pathway shows strict separation of responsibilities between the standards-setting body, the overall quality assurance through the Certification Organisation and the delivery by training companies and higher education institutes. This approach fully respects the national positions of the NQFs and, for example, any applied or required national schemes of quality assurance or licensing of VET bodies.

²⁰ <http://www.active-leisure-alliance.eu/projects/active-leisure-efq>

The experience of the international sectoral qualification frameworks and systems

Amongst the other objectives of the EQF, there is also the objective to integrate International Sectoral Qualifications, frameworks and systems in order to make them intelligible with EQF and thus more transparent and accountable. 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’.

In order to investigate the state of the art in integrating International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems with EQF, a study has been supported by the EU²¹.

The study confirms that recent developments of EU tools, and policies aiming to foster transnational cooperation in education and training, have concretely encouraged sector organisations to develop international sectoral initiatives. However, international sectoral initiatives are often not part of a formal education and training system and not integrated or fostered by NQF developments.

The study is interesting as it reviews the management structure, governance, as well functioning of the International SQF, thus offering examples for the adoption and/or future development of the structure of the SQFCGF.

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.

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. 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 an ad-hoc basis in order to discuss updates and trends of their sectors. 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

²¹ Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems with EQF, a Study has been provided by the EU; Publications Office of the European Union, 2016

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.

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. The frequency of the updating process varies but is often done every 2-3 years.

It is also noted that initiatives 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.

Nearly all organisations had some **quality assurance processes** in place for developing the initiatives that they manage, the most common were:

- Inviting feedback on standards and qualifications from members.
- Having output peer-reviewed with experts in their organisation (such as the organisation board by an expert sub-group). Sub-groups of experts are sometime established for developing the technical specifications for their initiatives. This approach is 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 or revised standards and qualifications.
- Inviting feedback from training providers and learners.
- Reviewing the training materials of the provider, to ensure the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are appropriate.
- Requiring teachers or examiners to meet certain criteria to deliver or accredit the training.
- Conducting a provider audit, where they reviewed provider training facilities and teaching materials.

The most common **funding source** for international sectoral initiatives are assessment or certification fees, followed by membership fees and licensing or accreditation fees or charging course tuition fees. Many organisations indicated that they received EU funding for their initiatives, usually at the development stage.

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 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.

Relationship with NQFs

Nine countries out of 31 currently have a national procedure in place (or under development) for including international sectoral qualifications in their National Qualifications Frameworks.

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)²².

The main reason why organisations chose to link their initiatives to NQFs was to improve national recognition. However, several organisations reported negative experiences of linking their initiatives to NQFs. The procedures are perceived as time consuming, slow and burdensome, also considering that NQF authorities in different countries have different regulations and criteria for referencing qualifications to their NQF.

The vast majority of 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.

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

Relationship with EQF and potentialities for linking ISQF to EQF

The most commonly mentioned reason for having or wanting to create a link with the EQF is to improve recognition. The majority of organisations have taken steps to link their initiative to the EQF.

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

²² Ibidem

- Organisations making a direct link to the EQF themselves or eventually including self-declared linkage based on a common set of criteria but no verification process.
- Initiatives link to the EQF through NQFs. However, the linking initiatives through NQFs is only available in a few countries,
- Strengthening indirect linkage to EQF by creating an agreement on requirements for ISQs to be included into a NQF or 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. However, 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.
- Developing a process for direct linkage either at the level of ISQF to the EQF, or at the level of ISQ to the EQF. The latter option covers a wider range of initiatives compared to the ISQF. This option 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.

Based on the due analysis of the state of the art and the available options, 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. 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 and in particular the type of objections put forward by the national authorities and focus of initiatives which have enough “critical mass” in terms of people/organisations involved and priorities for the EQF development.
- 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.
- 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.

In any case, an increased cooperation with EQF advisory board and/or its technical structures is envisaged in order to speed up the process.