

Frequently Asked Questions: Standards and Qualifications

1. What is the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for life long learning?

The EQF was formally adopted in April 2008 and it is a guideline for National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) built on the learning outcomes paradigm. It has eight levels including the upper levels associated with Higher Education. The EQF was the result of:

- the Lisbon Strategy and Europe's vision to be the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world;
- the Copenhagen Process which aims to enhance co-operation in Vocational Education and Training (VET);
- the Bologna Process which promotes cross-border and cross-institutional co-operation in Higher Education;
- globalisation which enhanced mobility of students and workers.

Both processes aim to achieve readable transparent qualifications and credit accumulation and transfer.

The EQF is a tool to:

- bridge the gap between VET and HE;
- link the NQFs of different countries within and outside the EU;
- promote quality, transparency and portability of qualifications;
- facilitate access and progression;and
- incorporate into one framework life long learning qualifications acquired in different settings: formal, informal and non-formal.

2. What is the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area QF/EHEA?

The QF/EHEA is a framework agreed by the 46 participating countries in the Bologna Process in May 2005 and which sets the study cycles in Higher Education. The first cycle is the first degree (Bachelor's) which typically includes between 180 and 240 credits on the assumption of 60 ECTS credits per year. The second cycle (Masters) refers to the second degree and typically includes between 90 and 120 ECTS with a minimum of 60 credits at the level of the second cycle. The third cycle (Doctoral degree) is the highest level on the EQF but it carries no specific number of ECTS credits. Representatives of Higher Education institutions have agreed on the level descriptors and the number of credits so that qualifications across Europe have a common value which fosters mobility of students and workers.

3. What is the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF)?

The Malta Qualifications Framework was officially launched in June 2007 and it is now in its implementation phase. The Framework incorporates three main education pathways: the general education route starting from the end of compulsory education and gives access to MQF level 4 and the higher levels of the framework; the VET path with levels from 1 to 5 which have the same parity of esteem as levels 1 to 5 of the general education route and the higher education area normally associated with degrees and is aligned to MQF levels 6 to 8. MQC is responsible for defining the levels of qualifications and competences within the MQF and for level-rating all qualifications.

4. What are level descriptors?

Level descriptors can be defined as qualifications criteria that measure complexity, volume and the level of learning expected for the particular qualification. The nature of the level descriptors is generic as a neutral reference point so that they can be applied to all forms of qualifications whether formal, informal and non-formal as well as to all sectoral qualifications. Level descriptors aim at establishing standards describing the progressing level of difficulty reflecting the various stages of the educational process from compulsory to lifelong learning. One of the tasks of the referencing process is to demonstrate a clear relationship between the level descriptors of the MQF and of the EQF.

5. What are learning outcomes?

According to the definition of a NQF a learning outcome is what a learner understands and is capable of doing at the end of a learning process. Therefore learning outcomes prepare individuals for both employment and for further education and training. The Learning Outcomes system is inclusive as it integrates all learning with flexible learning pathways including informal and non-formal learning.

6. Which are the Key Competences?

At MQF level 3 the Key Competences should be in place so that the learner proceeds to further and higher education. On the successful completion of compulsory education the learner is expected to achieve the following key competences:

1. Communication in the mother tongue;
2. Communication in foreign languages;
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
4. Digital competence;
5. Learning to learn;
6. Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, civic competence;
7. Entrepreneurship; and
8. Cultural expression

In 2007, MQC has published a book entitled *Descriptors of Key Competences in the National Qualifications Framework*.

7. What is the referencing process?

A referencing process is an opportunity to discover other qualifications frameworks and level descriptors and how these can fit into over-arching frameworks such as the EQF. This exercise has helped MQC to contextualise an education system of a small country in the broader context of a European education paradigm. The essential value of the European Qualifications Framework is that it will transform educational systems into a *Schengen* paradigm in which borderless mobility becomes an economic and political strength. In order to achieve this state-of-play, "Frameworks" must be related, they have to be referenced to a meta-Framework (EQF), so that divergences and contrasts in educational programmes will be ironed out through a flexible learning outcomes approach. When all Qualifications Frameworks are referenced to the EQF, a new level of trust, accountability and quality assurance will emerge across all Member States of the European Union. Such referencing will certainly make European education more visible and attractive within the Union but more importantly beyond it too. The European Commission set 2 timeframes: (a) for European countries to complete a clear and transparent referencing process by 2010 and (b) for all education and training providers

to give clear value to qualifications by 2012 by referring to the NQF level and the corresponding EQF level when supplying course descriptions, transcripts and diploma supplements.

8. What are credits?

Credit is a feature that measures the volume and the workload of learning and gives currency to qualifications. Assessment of learning outcomes entitles the learner to credit and therefore to a qualification recognized by the MQF. Credits are awarded for the assessment of outcomes achieved. MQC shall accredit full or partial qualifications offered by accredited institutions. The MQF does not prescribe transfer of credits, as it deals with exit points as access is at the discretion of the institution concerned which is regulated by its policies; however the MQF facilitates transfer of credits.

9. How does the credit system work?

The value of 1 credit is equivalent to 25 hours of study of which, according to the *Bologna Process* 6.25 hours are contact hours and 18.75 hours is the time allocated to self-study such as reading, research, seminars, conferences, tutorials, assignments, tests and related organized activities including informal and non-formal learning. This is calculated on the assumption that a learner follows 40 hours of full-time learning per week for 37.5 weeks per year, which is equivalent to a total of 1500 learning hours.

Anything less than 40 credits per year for level 1 and 60 credits per year for levels 2 to 7 does not lead to full certification, and therefore such partial certification does not necessarily give access to the next level.

10. What is level-rating?

Level rating is an exercise which involves the evaluation of the level of difficulty that matches one of the eight level descriptors of the MQF, the work load measured in credits, learning outcomes, quality assurance and assessment criteria. Levels given to qualifications that originate from overseas and those that are locally designed have the same parity of esteem as the qualifications in the framework.

11. Which qualifications fall within the Higher Education Area of the MQF?

The MQF has one higher education area. This consists of academic degrees such as those offered by the University of Malta and professional degrees such as those offered by the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute of Tourism Studies.