

Developments of EQF level 5: Stakeholder approach

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Summary: This article discusses the results achieved within the Erasmus+ project *Development of Sectoral Qualification Descriptors for EQF level 5. Objectives of the project oriented towards analysis of development of sectoral qualification descriptors at EQF level 5 and oriented towards increasing transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications, facilitating learning, employability and mobility.* Internationally comparable qualification descriptors could be used as a platform for developing new qualifications, allowing learners to move more easily between different types of education (such as higher education and vocational) and between different levels (such as VET and higher education) at home institutions as well as internationally. This paper aims to define in more comprehensive way main features of EQF level 5 qualifications in European countries, and how commonly understand learning outcomes can increase transferability of qualifications and the promotion of lifelong learning.

Introduction

Currently the diversity of qualification at EQF level 5 in Europe is huge, these type of qualifications across Europe offer access and progression routes. Depending on the type and purpose of a qualification EQF level 5 qualifications can provide access to and advancement in the labour market, these qualifications can also serve a double function being entry qualifications for both the labour market and higher education (with the possibility for credit transfer).

In some European countries qualifications are more related to employment and carrier development, while in others they are more oriented towards higher education. Almost all European Countries face challenges and need to develop tools facilitating recognition of qualifications at EQF level 5. Therefore Level 5 area should be considered as a area of overlap and bridging different systems together, transiting from VET to HE. Also zone of EQF level 5 can offer a platform for new qualifications and development of such qualifications are the priority in whole European Union.

The paper aims to analyse purpose of vocational education and training qualifications within EQF level 5 and to understand the stakeholders approach about the relevance of EQF level 5 qualifications to vocational education and training area.

CEDEFOP provides a working paper on EQF level 5 developments and it is a very useful tool for the analyses ¹. It examines the qualifications at level 5 of the EQF. Aim of the study a better understanding of the roles and functions of qualifications referred to EQF level 5, for further learning as well as for employment. strengthen the understanding of the way in which the learning outcomes approach is applied in qualifications frameworks across Europe – using level 5 as a reference point.

CEDEFOP study on EQF level 5 developments have demonstrated, that qualifications in this level operate across VET, higher and even general education, with a heterogeneous range of qualifications awarded by a wide range of VET and higher education institutions. Different types of institutions have been authorized to award level 5 qualifications:

- Higher education institutions;
- Centres for adult education;
- A VET college;
- A college for further education;
- Schools for post-secondary vocational education;
- Other providers, including private providers;
- Mixt type.

Due to the academic freedom, wider possibilities to implement study programmes (with or without qualifications), higher education sector has advanced developments with regard to EQF level 5 developments. But on the other side, vocational education and training (VET) can play a central role in preparing young people for work, developing the skills of adults and responding to the labour-market needs of the economy. VET adapts to the labour market rather for immediate employment of their graduates, while HE role should focus rather on long term employability which means both cooperation with and shaping of the world of work. Despite this role, VET has been oddly neglected and marginalised in policy discussions, often overshadowed by the increasing emphasis on general academic education and the role of schools in preparing students for university education.

According to D. Hale EQF level 5 has potential to include all types of qualifications:

- *Short cycle higher education (HE providers);*
- *Higher VET (VET providers);*
- *Professional Diplomas (Business Academies, Private Providers...)*
- *Certificates and small courses (professional and vocational bodies, national and internationally, training providers)².*

This variety however is not fully present in many of European countries and higher education sector has advanced developments with regard to EQF level 5 developments. At the moment HE operates within the Bologna process and tools (degree system, ECTS), VET operates within the Copenhagen process and own instrument (EQAVET, Europass, ECVET). Both systems offer education programmes at EQF level 5 but their providers operate in quite different European

¹ CEDEFOP 'Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to higher education, 2014.

² H. Dalle, 2016, European Level 5 area: a tandem for VET and HE.

contexts. HE providers have more institutional autonomy, academic freedom and accountability, on the other hand in VET the educational process and its outcome are strongly driven by social partners.

According to CEDEFOP study (2014), learning pathways leading to EQF level 5 qualifications can be school-based, work-based or dual, part-time as well as full-time. Currently different modes of acquisition are operating in different European countries:

- Full-time school/college based programmes including short work placements or substantial work placements;
- Part-time school/college based programmes including short work placements or substantial work placements;
- Dual programmes; periods of employment/work combined with school/college based programmes;
- Validation of non-formal learning and informal learning,
- Long work placement combined with periods of schooling/mandatory courses.

Short cycle programs have gained prominence in many countries and the EQF, adopted in 2008, includes level 5, which is normally the level to which short cycle qualifications, whether in higher education or VET, are referenced³. While some qualifications referenced against EQF level 5 are not higher education qualifications, many are, and it is worth noting that there are also qualifications at first and second degree level (EQF levels 6 and 7) that are not considered higher education qualifications in the systems to which they belong. It therefore seems incongruent that the QF-EHEA does not acknowledge the widespread existence of short cycle degrees in national systems.

Regardless of whether the short cycle qualifications are included in the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA, the qualifications framework should provide for clear articulation pathways connecting the short cycle qualifications to the first cycle (bachelor) qualifications. Public authorities should encourage higher education institutions in cooperation with the other providers of short cycle study programs to develop those articulation pathways.

Dublin descriptors (developed by the “joint quality initiative as part of the Bologna process) still are used in the Framework for Qualifications of EHEA compared to the descriptors as used in the EQF level 5:

Table No. 1 Comparison of level 5 descriptors

HE short cycle (within the first cycle)	EQF level 5
The full set of “Dublin descriptors” Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:	The learning outcomes relevant to level 5 are

³ CEDEFOP Briefing Note “The hidden potential of level 5 qualifications” (June 2014), available at http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/9089_en.pdf.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle; 	<p>Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts; - have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems; 	<p>Comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems;</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients; - have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy. 	<p>Exercise management and supervision in the contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change</p> <p>Review and develop performance of self and others.</p>

This comparison demonstrates the potential of EQF level 5 qualifications: the skills and knowledge descriptions for this level can be transformed to both sides: VET or Higher education. There is clear emphasis on deep understanding of study or work field, also solid theoretical basis within the specific area, problem solving and autonomy skills. This is why EQF level 5 qualifications allowing learners to move more easily between different types of education (such as academic and vocational) and between different levels (such as VET and higher education), as they decide. EQF level 5 can also be used as a platform for developing new types of qualifications, whether initial (IVET) or continuing vocational education and training (CVET) qualifications or short-cycle higher education (SCHE) qualifications.

Learning outcomes in EQF level 5

Learning outcomes means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2008).

Learning outcomes approach can be used for a number of purposes: for the development of training and learning programmes (programme level learning outcomes) separate modules (curriculum level learning outcomes), learning outcomes for the lesson. They may furthermore be used by national authorities to define entire qualifications – sometimes structured within or linked to qualifications frameworks and systems⁴. International bodies

⁴ Cedefop (2017). Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/566770>

may, finally, use learning outcomes for the purposes of transparency, comparability, credit transfer and recognition.

Following these definitions, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to have qualification level descriptors not an outcome based. Without some explicit statements about the general outcomes of qualifications, it would be hard to compare different types of qualifications at the same level or to decide how to place new qualifications on EQF level 5 and NQFs.

It is not absolutely essential for the qualifications themselves to be defined in terms of learning outcomes. However, there are many reasons why it is valuable to have the contents of the framework described in at least broad outcome terms. In some sectors different level descriptors already exist that are useful to create descriptors for EQF level 5, but the content of those could be very different.

It is important to be aware of the purposes of level descriptors and their limitations. Level descriptors have two main purposes⁵:

- They make explicit the tacit understandings of providers and stakeholders about the nature of qualification levels and educational progression. The process of developing level descriptors compels those engaged in it to make clear statements about the characteristics and outcomes of qualifications and how qualifications at adjacent level differ from each other. This can often highlight ambiguities and inconsistencies and lead to clearer and better-grounded understandings.
- They provide a means of making comparison across different types of qualification. This is important in the development of progression routes and vital in the implementation of credit transfer systems. There is more than one dimension of 'level'. Some qualifications are more concerned with developments of knowledge; others with skills or personal and professional competences. The use of broadly defined level descriptors provides the basis for agreeing that qualifications belong at the same level notwithstanding different relative emphases of knowledge, skills etc. it is generally the case in existing frameworks that qualifications do not have to meet all aspects of a level descriptor to be considered to meet the level requirements.

The learning outcomes are very differently described for the specific qualifications. First of all, there is a difference in the scope what is described; either full qualifications or separate units/modules of qualifications. Secondly, the concepts and terminology used differs across qualifications and national contexts. It is hard to identify directly that the NQF level descriptors are actually being used to describe the qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. The following chapters of the paper explore how the learning outcomes can be used for the definition sector specific qualifications involving into the process of development of sectoral qualification descriptors different stakeholders. The construction sector example is presented below.

View of Stakeholders: Round table discussions

⁵ CEDEFOP Analysis and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries. 2013

For the purpose of exploration of the possibilities of EQF level 5 qualification round table discussions have been chosen as a research method. The roundtable discussion served for several purposes: helped to identify the needs of main stakeholders and different groups of interest (representatives of employers, VET training and Higher education institutions, learners and broader public) and allowing to discuss broader possible benefits from EQF level 5 providing advanced VET skills and competences for learners, employees and labour market. Results of the round table discussion have been used to prepare methodology for the development of Internationally comparable qualification descriptors at EQF level 5 in selected sectors.

Roundtable discussions have been organised as a focus events to explore closely specific issues identified elsewhere or to identify new issues of EQF level 5 qualifications, not addressed before, and therefore can be used to explore solutions, define actions, develop new types of qualifications.

The aim of round table discussions was to discuss need for and potential of EQF level 5 qualifications from the perspective of main existing and possible stakeholders. Also:

- Identify the function of qualifications at level 5;
- Find out what are the areas of occupational activity of the sector at level V;
- Specify the type of qualifications functioning in the labour market at level V;
- Identify “missing” or possible qualifications (if any).

Every type of qualifications is connected to the stakeholders, learners, VET or HE or secondary education providers and the needs for flexibility and other requirements.

Roundtable discussions were used as a method for identification of what could be possible interest of employers on development of new (or revision of existing) level 5 qualifications from the perspective of main stakeholders. Moreover, roundtable discussions provided an opportunity for participants to share and explore perceptions, experiences and concerns surrounding the development of EQF level 5.

Different types of stakeholders have been involved: Representatives from vocational education and training, Representatives from higher education institutions, VET teachers and trainers, Representatives of employers from selected sectors, Skilled employees from the sectors, Representatives of relevant professional bodies, Researchers.

For the common language, reference to the EQF is a main tool which enables qualifications systems with their implicit levels or/and national and sectoral qualifications frameworks to relate to each other is very important. EQF allows each country reference its national qualifications (in terms of diplomas, certificates or awards) to the eight EQF levels via national qualifications frameworks or the implicit levels in the national qualifications systems.

EQF level 5 knowledge, skills and competence are described as follows:

Knowledge:

• *Comprehensive, specialized, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge;*

Cognitive and practical skills:

- A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems;

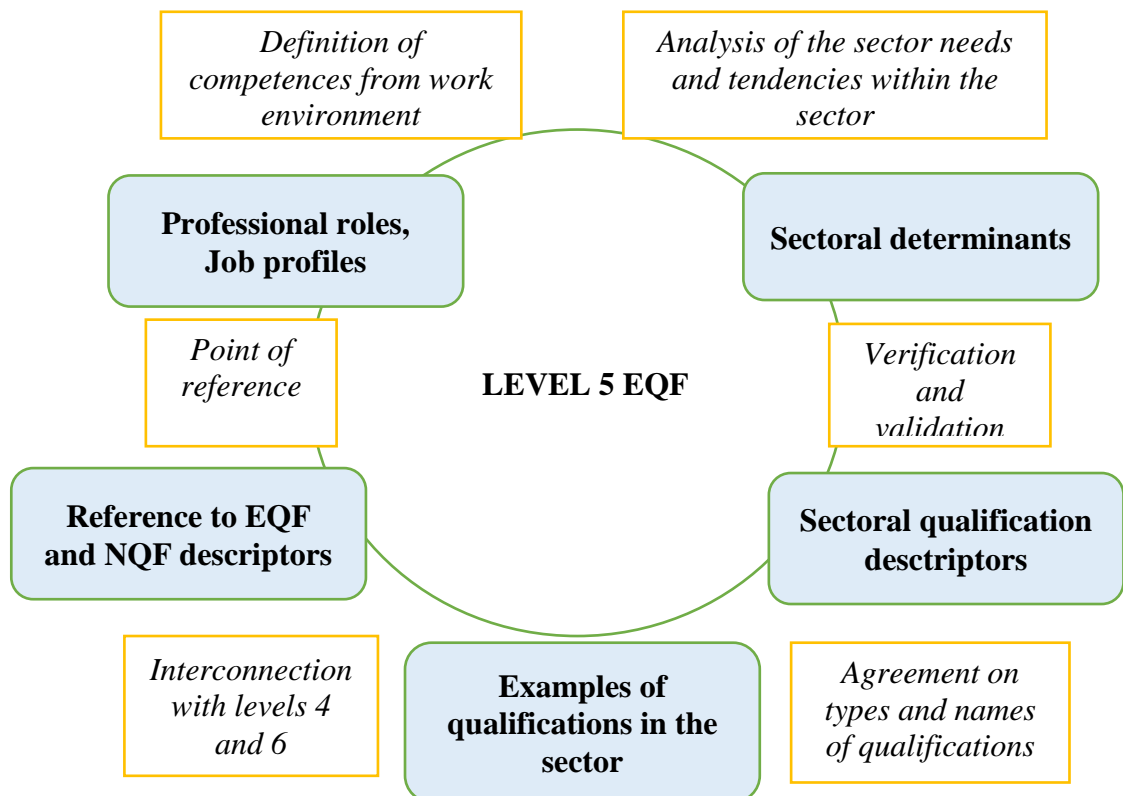
Competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others.

These descriptors serve as a good reference point, but the variety of qualifications linked to EQF level 5 and varied use of EQF level 5 in Europe suggest that these descriptors are too narrow to present full potential of this level and to present full range of knowledge, skills and competencies existing.

As for the discussion in construction sector, broader categories have been chosen in order to present for the stakeholders more broader view about that EQF level 5 qualification holder (there formally or non-formally acquired) is able to perform. Different characteristics of qualifications have been discussed aiming clear and unified understanding that is level 5 within construction sector:

Scheme 1. Components for the development of sectoral descriptors:



Various stakeholders agreed that the important tasks of a person which competencies correspond to EQF level 5 learning outcomes are link with construction projects planning and execution phase. Personnel in charge with this work do not have to be able to execute planning themselves, but they must understand principles and forms of planning and be able to transform the results of planning into detailed, short termed work plans and into a practical work organisation on site. They also have to be able to conduct and to supervise the work, to dispose labour, equipment and material in the frame of the overall planning, and to take responsibility for the fitting of results with tender specifications, quality norms and deadlines. Last but not least, the must be able to take over responsibility for health and safety as well as for environmental issues. For this work knowledge, skills and competence on level five are required.

Discussions also showed that for EQF level 5 qualification different levels of proficiency occurs: some areas require good knowledge and skills (such as understanding work organisation procedures, fundamental construction work processes, etc.) while some other skills require higher level of skills or as it was identified “mastery level”.

Table No. 2. Areas of competence and levels of competence for Construction sector in EQF 5.

<i>Areas of competence/skills Level of proficiency</i>	<i>Knowledge/ information</i>	<i>Good skills (ability to perform)</i>	<i>Mastery (high level of professional skills)</i>
Construction tools, equipment	√		
Construction materials	√		
Rules, regulations, documentation	√		
Work organisation procedures	√	√	
Using principles of fundamental construction work processes			√
Understanding and using new construction technologies and related skills (such as reading read working drawings for construction projects in 2D, 3D format)			
Overlapping/interrelated technologies			√
Team work/ Organisation of work flow		√	
Communicate with client and construction engineers/project managers		√	
Planning work of oneself and the others			√
Training of lower qualification workers		√	
Ability to train apprentices			√

Ensure safety and health at work	√	√	
Rational use of the resources	√		
Responsibility for overall quality	√	√	

Round table discussion indicated that Level 5 in construction requires to know how to apply methodology and procedures of planning, transformation of planning into production, control construction projects, perform quality control, surveying, marking and measurement, management of production on site (labour, equipment, material) including timetables, cost and return control systems, how to organise non-formal and support informal learning on site.

Also, this level professional is involved in all stages of construction project management processes: taking part in planning (materials, tools, resources), organising and executing (taking care of the main work flow and distribution of tasks as well as monitoring and assessing of results and overall quality).

One of the tasks during discussions was to broader scope of competences and skills (such as organisational social and personal) also have been discussed. Considering this as important aspect of development of new qualifications and assessing non-formally acquired skills. Following competencies were mentioned as important for this level:

<i>Organisational</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Social</i>
Leadership and Management and distribution of tasks	Flexibility (ability to adapt to new situations)	Communication with customers and upper management
Planning materials, tools, equipment and resources	Autonomy	Ability to work in an international context
Management of risk and problem solving	Critical and self-critical abilities	Negotiation competence
Management and distribution of tasks	Entrepreneurship, imitativeness	Conflict management
Quality control	Capacity to applying knowledge and imbedding innovations	Customer orientation
Project management	Learning to learn	Ability to work in team
Training of lower qualification subordinates	Quality orientation	

Outcomes of the discussion

The roundtable discussion served for several purposes: helped to identify the needs of main stakeholders and different groups of interest (representatives of employers, VET training and Higher education institutions, learners and broader public) and allowing to discuss broader possible benefits from EQF level 5 potential for learners, employees and labour market providing advanced VET skills and competences. Through this could be regarded as a general tendency, this is not necessary the rule in all sectors.

It is obvious that these findings do not fit directly to the field of “pure” vocational education” neither it is exactly higher education, strictly speaking. It could be concluded that from the point of view of stakeholders (especially employers) this level qualifications are considered very broad (encompassing problem solving, handling critical situations and quality management for example) and still very closely related to the construction site works and therefore vocational skills. EQF level 5 has been identified as something in between VET and HE, bridging together planning (or designing) and execution phase, requiring occupational as well as manager and trainer skills.

Basically, learning outcomes for this level of qualifications can be divided into three main building blocks: sector or occupation related competence, managerial competence and competence related to the training, teaching, assessing of lower qualification workers. Also, learning outcomes proved to be a very useful tool for common language and understanding and served for the drafting of the “portrait” of EQF level 5 qualification holder.

Roundtable discussions provided more detailed information about knowledge, cognitive and practical skills and competence than referential EQF descriptors, but all findings correspond to description provided in European Qualification Framework, showing that knowledge are of comprehensive, specialised nature, within *a field of work* or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.

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