

ETF POLICY BRIEFING

EVIDENCE, PRACTICE & ADVICE FOR POLICY MAKERS



Better recognition of qualifications

Qualification system reform has been a priority in the EU, its neighbouring countries and other world regions for the past two decades.

Countries use national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) as the principal instrument to drive this reform¹. ETF has advised most of the EU's neighbouring countries² plus those of Central Asia on NQF development.

Worldwide, according to the 2022 edition of the Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks, most frameworks are delivering on their intended functions³. Countries have introduced qualifications based on learning outcomes, apply revised quality assurance criteria to raise their quality, have established databases to make them more accessible, and include a diversity of qualification types in their frameworks.

NQFs, especially when linked via regional qualifications frameworks (RQFs), such as the European Qualifications Framework, and when certificates display NQF levels, facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications internationally, and so generate information useful in informing recognition decisions. But countries also need to pay attention to the practices applied in recognition of qualifications obtained by the holder in one country and carried to another country.

ETF has supported recognition work since NQFs became an ETF policy area. Our individual NQF reports⁴, first published in 2013, on neighbouring and Central Asian countries' NQFs include sections that cover recognition policies and practices applied by the respective country. We have organised regional events, published a survey of qualification recognition centres (QRCs), plus a

compendium of recognition procedures applied by some EU countries to refugees' qualifications. We have also cooperated with third countries⁵ in comparing their NQFs to the EQF, a process which provides data on qualifications and qualification systems useful to EU countries in making recognition decisions.

Additionally, we have long been active in the related area of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), in which we advise countries on developing their VNFIL systems, have organised multiple events, and conduct regular systems analyses and compile inventories of national systems and practices⁶.

Our engagement is now intensifying because of the broader economic and social forces of labour and skills shortages and migration. Many EU countries face labour shortages, contrasting with labour surpluses in some third countries. While the EU is making every effort to fill these from within its Member States, it also needs to recruit skilled workers from around the world. To facilitate their entry to EU labour markets, the EU is adopting a range of measures, some of which are about recognition because of the role it can play in facilitating international mobility, in this case into the EU. Accordingly, the EU has adopted a new package of measures, agreements, and legislation, whose aims include better recognition of qualifications and skills carried by third-country citizens moving to the Union. ETF is contributing to implementing this package.

While there is an urgency in the current climate to intensify implementation of measures that facilitate recognition, ETF also underlines the

¹ It may be useful to explain the relationship between a national qualifications system (NQS) and a national qualifications framework (NQF). In essence, a qualification system is everything in a country's education system that leads to the award of a qualification, spanning relevant legislation, institutions, schools, authorities, quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, and other aspects. An NQF is a specific tool within a qualification system. In this publication, we use the definitions contained in the EU's Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)). For the purposes of this paper, we apply these definitions to any country's qualification system.

² https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/where-we-work?field_related_regions_target_id_verf=All

We currently work with 29 neighbouring and Central Asian countries in human capital development in the context of EU enlargement, neighbourhood, and other external relations policies, which variously cover the countries of Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Additionally, we have also begun to work with regions and countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

³ "The Global Inventory of national and regional qualifications framework, 2022", UNSCO, ETF, Cedefop, 2023, <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/global-inventory-national-and-regional-qualifications-0>

⁴ <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/qualifications-and-qualification-systems>

⁵ I.e., any country outside the EU or whose citizens do not enjoy the EU right to freedom of movement.

⁶ <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/qualifications-and-qualification-systems>

importance of recognition in contributing to better labour market matching, fairness, and other gains, some of which are enumerated below, regardless of the prevailing policies.

This paper is about which bodies apply what processes in the recognition of qualifications from other countries and suggests how these practices might be disseminated, supported,

and improved. It explains the purposes of recognition; highlights the benefits to various parties of better recognition; describes and compares recognition practices in the different education sectors of VET, HE, and the regulated professions, identifies the obstacles to efficient recognition; and offers recommendations to overcome these.

Recognition explained

Recognition of a foreign or third-country qualification is usually sought for one of two purposes:

- access to a learning programme - academic recognition - where evaluators assess whether the applicant is capable of pursuing or continuing studies along their desired path, and at the desired level.
- employment in an occupation - professional recognition - where evaluators assess whether the knowledge and professional skills of the applicant are sufficient to pursue that profession or occupation in the receiving country.

Formal recognition of qualifications is also called credential evaluation. It is conducted by national qualifications recognition centres (QRCs), industry sectoral bodies or chambers of commerce for vocational qualifications, and by higher education institutions. Collectively,

these are “competent recognition authorities”, which assess applicants’ requests for confirmation of the comparability of their foreign qualification to the (closest) national counterpart qualification(s).

Qualifications in the same field are never identical one country to another. What recognition authorities seek to establish is that there is no substantial difference between a national and a foreign qualification that would prevent recognition in the receiving country. Evaluators assess the qualification and issue a decision: recognition, partial recognition, or refusal. Partial recognition requires applicants to pursue supplementary training and/or additional assessment.

Recognition by a QRC does not equate to an offer of a job or a place on a programme - these decisions remain the prerogative of employers and education and training providers, respectively.

Qualifications recognition – benefits and beneficiaries

While there are not many studies available on the relationship between recognition of a qualification and tangible gains to the individual, society, and employers, analyses conducted by Sweden and Germany do provide evidence that there are indeed such gains, even if it is safer to talk of correlation than of direct cause and effect.

Sweden’s recognition agency, the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR), conducted a survey in 2015⁷, which found that

foreign graduates who submitted their qualifications for evaluation usually found work more quickly. After 1 year, 9% more were employed - integrating them earlier into the workplace.

Germany has closely monitored its 2012 Recognition Act⁸. Figures from its 2016 survey indicate that formal qualifications recognition:

- is closely linked to raised levels of migrant employment. 59% of immigrants requesting recognition were in employment at the time

⁷ One step on the road the labour market”, the Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2015”.

⁸ Formally, the “Law to improve the assessment and recognition of professional and vocational education and training qualifications acquired abroad”.

of their application. Following favourable recognition decisions, employment levels rose to 73%.

- makes it more likely that the job found will be aligned with the qualification held. At the time applications were submitted, 69%

worked in the occupation for which they held a qualification, rising to 89% once recognition was granted.

- appears to lead to salary rises – after recognition, the report identified salary rises of between 15% and 45%.

Recognition is a key component in the EU's new Skills and Talent Mobility package⁹

Europe doesn't have enough lorry drivers, plumbers, software engineers, and nurses. While some people can re-train, this will not happen fast enough to plug the gaps. Conversely, some of the Union's neighbours face the opposite problem of labour surpluses, resulting in unemployment and underemployment. An ETF study on the Western Balkans found that there is "insufficient deployment" of people's skills from those countries (ETF 2021)¹⁰.

The 2023 Skills and Talent Mobility package launched by the European Commission is a response to these labour market imbalances. It comprises:

- the Talent Partnerships, reciprocal agreements between EU and third countries, which allow third-country citizens to work in key sectors in the EU economy, while the EU offers investment in the third countries' education and training systems. Measures in such programmes include re-integrating returning migrants back into their countries' labour markets, via careers advice and support to QRCs in recognising the returnees' qualifications which were awarded in the EU countries.
- the Talent Pool, which creates a database to match third country citizens to vacancies in the EU in shortage sectors such as health and ICT.
- a new Commission Recommendation on recognition, which encourages EU countries to streamline recognition decisions by fast-tracking assessments of people in priority sectors; using the EQF to support comparability between EU and non-EU qualifications; developing databases to share information on third country-qualifications; and extending the ENIC-NARIC network to cover VET qualifications.

The Recommendation asks ETF to facilitate recognition of third country qualifications, notably via our planned network of databases and by establishing a qualifications resource hub.

Recognition of different types of qualification compared – practices, tools, networks

Institutional arrangements in recognition vary between countries and can be complex within them. As indicated above, a range of institutions - national centres, industry sector bodies, chambers of commerce, and higher education institutions - may be involved in making recognition decisions in a given country.

Most countries have a national-level body to coordinate national policies and practices in recognition. ETF's recognition survey of 2022-23¹¹ focussed on these qualification recognition centre (QRCs), which may be autonomous agencies, quality assurance bodies, or offices within national ministries. These centres are staffed by experts in

⁹ Factsheet, Skills and Talent Mobility package, [Commission proposes new measures on skills and talent \(europa.eu\)](https://commission.europa.eu/press-features/statement-commission-president-2023-03-23_en)

¹⁰ ETF (2022), 'Use it or lose it!' How do migration, human capital and the labour market interact in the Western Balkans? | ETF ([europa.eu](https://www.etf.europa.eu/))

¹¹ Mapping of Qualification Recognition Centres, ETF 2023, <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/mapping-qualifications-recognition-centres>

recognition who review applications for recognition of foreign qualifications.

Almost all national QRCs cover higher education (HE) qualifications, while fewer cover vocational education and training (VET) qualifications. Systems used to recognise HE qualifications are also more internationally integrated than those that recognise VET qualifications. In Europe, the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)¹² guides recognition in HE. It is a legal instrument, co-developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, and adopted in 1997. Other world regions e.g., Asia and the Pacific, and Africa, have or are developing similar arrangements¹³. There is also the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, which fulfils similar functions¹⁴.

The LRC sets rules for recognition of HE qualifications in Europe, establishing and requiring the application of the principle of substantial difference, which requires receiving countries to recognise comparable qualifications from other countries, unless a substantial difference in related study duration and curriculum content etc. between the two qualifications can be determined. The LRC process also provides tools and guidance to support assessments¹⁵.

The LRC is implemented by the network of recognition centres called ENIC-NARIC¹⁶, which collectively develops tools and shares knowledge on recognition of qualifications in HE, and qualifications enabling access to HE, and promotes peer-learning and expertise development among the credential evaluators who staff the recognition centres.

There is no comparable systematic international guidance or implementing network for VET qualifications. While ETF's survey and findings from other studies, such as that by an EU project called BRAVO¹⁷, find that some ENICs or NARICs do handle recognition in VET, not all do, and the tools and information available are less developed than for HE. Further, as VET is more closely tied to labour markets, evaluation of foreign VET qualifications requires confirmation of task-specific competencies, which complicates comparability for experts assessing foreign qualifications. In practice, as the BRAVO project revealed, many QRCs, when interpreting VET qualifications, borrow from the LRC criteria and approaches, and use the tools designed for HE recognition.

Those occupations requiring the practitioner to hold a qualification specified in law are known as regulated professions. They can cover qualifications acquired in higher education, VET, or adult learning. Perhaps the best known are those where there is a risk of physical harm from unqualified people. Doctor, nurse, dentist, and architect are examples. Some occupations – teacher is one - may be regulated in one country but not in another, depending on the practices and laws of the particular country. Most occupations in most countries are not regulated.

In the EU, Directive 2005/36/EC¹⁸ grants rights to EU citizens to practice their profession in another EU/EEA country via requiring the receiving country to recognise the qualification they acquired in their home country.

¹² Formally the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. Both EU and non-EU European countries participate.

¹³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention>

¹⁴ <https://www.enic-naric.net/page-recognition-conventions>

¹⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention>

¹⁶ https://www.enic-naric.net/page-enic-naric_reference_documents

¹⁷ ENIC (European Network of Information Centres in the European Region) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union): <https://www.enic-naric.net/>

¹⁸ BRAVO project, <https://erasmuspluss.no/bravo> Member countries are Norway, Sweden, and Lithuania.

¹⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2005/36/oj> and <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:354:0132:0170:en:PDF>

Obstacles to recognition

Countries can lack access to information on other countries' qualifications. This is a pressing issue for EU countries, which currently struggle to understand many third-country qualifications. This can be due to differences in the organisation of education, training and qualification systems, language differences, difficulties with verifying authenticity, and a lack of established networks and contacts through which to build trust and understanding in qualifications awarded outside the Union.

Further, national authorities manage data and information on the recognition of skills and qualifications differently from one another - for example not all EU country databases include statements of recognition of VET qualifications from third countries - and therefore have limited capacity to exchange information with each other and develop consistent approaches to recognising the skills and qualifications of third-country nationals.

For EU employers, lack of access to information on qualifications obtained in third countries, burdensome administrative processes, translation requirements, verifying authenticity, compliance, and lengthy processing times, can make it harder for them to attract talent in a competitive global labour market.

The ETF survey conducted in 2022 -23 found that QRCs in EU and partner countries lack

resources to efficiently handle the rising number of applications they now receive and that they struggle to keep pace with staff training needs in areas such as digitalisation of qualification systems.

Apart from diminishing the appeal of the EU to potential migrants, one consequence of non-recognition is that migrants are often overqualified for the posts they fill in the EU. In 2022, the Union's over-qualification rate was 39.4% for non-Union citizens, 31.8 % for Union citizens from other Member States while 21.1% for nationals of the Member State in question¹⁹.

Moreover, people seeking recognition may be required, due to non-recognition, to repeat learning, involving months or more of study to obtain a qualification issued within the Member State. So, as things stand, they are employed at levels lower than their skills and qualifications merit, which is brain waste. They are consequently paid less and therefore they send less money home, deny employers in the EU skilled support, and contribute less to EU states' finances.

Migrants who return to their country of origin (a pattern called circular migration), often struggle to have their EU-acquired qualifications recognised, as their home countries may lack adequate resources to evaluate the qualification fully.

ETF recommendations for better recognition

ETF advises countries to implement the following measures:

Use common methods and instruments to make qualifications easier to understand and recognise

All EU countries and many third countries have NQFs and describe new qualifications in learning outcomes, so easing mutual understanding. These NQFs can be linked to facilitate comparison and eventual recognition of individual qualifications. ETF recommends

continued EU support to neighbouring and other countries in qualifications system implementation.

We likewise favour comparison of third countries' NQFs to the EQF, which will result in more information being available to EU Member States on these countries' qualifications systems, so supporting recognition decisions.

Third countries should indicate NQF levels on certificates, and accelerate inclusion of

¹⁹https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSA_EGAN/default/table?lang=en

qualifications in national databases, to provide accessible, accurate and detailed information to EU employers and providers.

ESCO²⁰ is a multilingual classification system which defines skills, competences, and occupations, which can then be then correlated with qualifications and used in job- or further learning-matching platforms. Non-EU countries can adopt ESCO to enable their skills-related information to be compatible with that of EU countries.

The Europass²¹ portfolio, including the VET certificate supplement, gives employers and providers information about what is inside qualifications, again aiding recognition decisions.

Modernise and link qualifications databases to systemise and exchange information

Most third countries already operate databases or registers containing descriptions of qualifications, standards, curriculum, awarding bodies, and providers. ETF is currently working with the EU's neighbouring countries to establish a network of such national databases, proposing common formats - countries can adapt their databases to incorporate ESCO, and the European Learning Model, ELM²². ELM provides a common data model to describe and present learning in Europe, and supports data exchange among learners, providers, and employers.

Using these EU tools, third countries can ensure that their data on qualifications, digital credentials, and accredited providers, is comparable to that contained in EU countries' databases, so providing information useful to credential evaluators in making recognition decisions. Countries can seek grants from the EU's various programmes to support these transformations. Meanwhile, EU countries can use databases to share information with each other on third-country qualifications and their recognition decisions to date.

Use guidance to recognise micro credentials

ETF offers its own new guidelines on micro credentials²³. We suggest that EU and third countries develop these small-volume qualifications on common EU lines, for compatibility and easier recognition.

Extend ENIC-NARIC to VET

Currently recognition in VET is fragmented and lacks the coordination enjoyed by HE via the ENIC-NARIC network. Both the BRAVO and ETF projects already mentioned identified a growing interest among centres in VET recognition. Centres are calling for more VET-oriented manuals and information e.g., on best practices and on countries' VET and quality assurance systems. The 2023 Recommendation's encouragement to Member States to extend the ENIC-NARIC network's competence to VET is thus likely to find a receptive audience.

Address capacities of centres and practitioners

ETF's survey in 2023-23 and other studies report that in both EU and neighbouring countries recognition officers face rising and daunting levels of applications. Staffing and other resource is needed. Further, upgrading of technical systems and staff training are necessary to adapt to emerging themes such as digitalisation of qualification systems, which may span topics such as databases and case management systems, and in interpreting non-traditional qualifications such as micro credentials.

Reach users

The same surveys cited above also indicate the difficulties centres have in reaching smaller employers to communicate their services and information available on third country qualifications, and in making migrants aware of the opportunities for recognition available to them. Recognition offices can go through public employment services to promote their services to employers and migrants. Websites

²⁰ <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en>

²¹ <https://europa.eu/europass/en>

²² <https://europa.eu/europass/en/news/launch-european-learning-model>

²³ <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/guide-design-issue-and-recognise-micro-credentials>

of centres may also provide information useful to employers and third-country citizens, as they contain information about qualification systems, links to sites or databases containing individual qualifications, and descriptions of recognition procedures.

Implement validation systems

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) enables people to make the skills that they have acquired outside formal education visible via e.g., certification, following an assessment. Validation can be offered to migrants as a component of an integrated package alongside guidance, recognition, and supplementary training, both before departure and on arrival.

ETF supports VNFIL development in its partner countries.

Develop guidance services for departing and returning people

Countries can access EU funds to support public employment services (PESs) in providing citizens with pre-departure information on vacancies, what skills are needed where, and skills assessments and qualifications recognition procedures in EU countries.

Returnees should be advised on the procedures in their home countries for recognition of any qualifications they may have acquired while working in the EU, and on validating their new skills.

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