

NQF state of play



Estonia 2018

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Introduction and context

The Estonian school system is among the best performing in the EU, with the lowest percentage of underachievers in science and mathematics and the second lowest in reading, according to the 2015 Programme for international student assessment (PISA) results. The impact of socioeconomic status on the acquisition of basic skills is one of the lowest in the EU. However, national examinations show that the learning outcomes of students in schools in rural areas are lower than those of their peers in urban areas and there is a performance gap between students studying in Estonian and those in Russian-medium school. The proportion of Russian-medium basic school graduates (ISCED 1-2) with at least an intermediate level of proficiency in Estonian (B1) decreased to 57% in 2017, significantly below the 90% national target set for 2020. However, Estonian language acquisition has been improving in upper secondary. Tertiary educational achievement and adult participation in lifelong learning are above EU averages. The rate of early school leavers was 10.8% in 2017; although this is around the EU average (10.6), it is above the national target of 9.5% set in the national reform programme Estonia 2020 ([1]). Early school leaving remained virtually unchanged in recent years and is high in the context of a shrinking population, skills shortages and the need to update the skills of the population. The rate remains much higher for men (14.2%) than women (7.3%). Efforts are being made to improve the attractiveness of VET, which remains low. The share of basic school graduates who continue to VET has not increased significantly in the past ten years; it was 25% in 2017, below the national target of 35%. However, recent data shows an increasing number of young people (37%) are opting for VET three years after graduating from basic education, showing that strengthening career counselling during the last two years might have helped. The employment rate of recent VET graduates was 86.2%, above the EU average (76.6%). The employment rate of recent graduates in higher education improved in 2017 to 83% (75.5% in 2016), placing it slightly below the EU average of 84.9% (European Commission, 2018).

On 12 December 2018, Parliament adopted amendments to the Vocational Educational Institutions Act ([2]) to link vocational programmes better with the labour market and renew the funding principles of vocational schools. Up to 20% of school operating expenses will be covered by performance-based financing, determined by school results. The aim of the performance-based financing is to motivate

schools to complete their main tasks successfully. The act foresees more flexible ways to access vocational training and to update quality assessment. The way that current accreditation of vocational education is organised will be replaced by quality assessment. This change means that a study-centred approach at school will be developed and the trustworthiness of vocational education increased. The needs of local employers and the labour force are to be taken into account to a greater extent, vocational studies are to become more flexible, and new forms of study will be piloted in cooperation with local governments ([3]).

There is a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning, the Estonian qualifications framework (EstQF), established in 2008 through the Professions Act ([4]). It has eight levels and includes all State-recognised qualifications. The overarching framework brings together four sub-frameworks; for higher education qualifications ([5]), for vocational education and training (VET) qualifications ([6]), for general education qualifications ([7]) and for occupational qualifications ([8]). The sub-frameworks include specific descriptors as defined in the corresponding national educational standards, underpinning quality assurance activities.

Referencing of the EstQF to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and self-certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) was completed in 2011; the joint report was endorsed in the EQF advisory group in October 2011. The referencing report was revised and updated in 2016 to include recent developments in the education system (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016).

The national lifelong learning strategy ([9]) has set five goals for 2020, aiming to tackle existing challenges in a holistic approach: a change in the approach to learning; competent and motivated teachers and school leadership; concordance of lifelong learning opportunities with labour market needs; a digital focus in lifelong learning; equal opportunities and increased participation in lifelong learning.

Policy objectives

The NQF's ambition in Estonia is twofold: to be a tool for transparency and communication and to support lifelong learning. More specifically, policy objectives addressed by the EstQF are to:

- a. improve the link between education/training and the labour market;
- b. increase consistency of the education offer and of the qualification system;
- c. provide transparency for employers and individuals;
- d. increase understanding of Estonian qualifications within the country and abroad;
- e. introduce common quality assurance criteria;
- f. support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- g. monitor supply and demand for learning.

It is expected that implementation of an overarching NQF will increase coherence of education and training, and help introduce coherent methods for standard-setting. The referencing process has already provided a stimulus in this direction, and 'convergence of the formal educational system and occupational qualifications system has taken place', while the barriers between the two systems have been lowered (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016). The purpose of the EstQF has not been changed.

Another important policy objective is to increase the participation rate in lifelong learning activities among adults (25-64) from 15.7% in 2016 to 20% in 2020, set as a national target in the national reform programme Estonia 2020.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The comprehensive EstQF has eight qualification levels; its descriptors are identical to EQF level descriptors. They are defined in terms of learning outcomes, as knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills (cognitive skills – use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking; and practical skills – manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and degree of responsibility and autonomy (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016). More detailed descriptors have been developed in the four sub-frameworks for general education, initial vocational education, higher education and occupational qualifications. An EstQF level is assigned to each of the qualifications in these sub-frameworks.

Two types of State-recognised qualification are included in the EstQF:

- a. formal education qualifications, awarded after completion of educational programmes at all levels (general, vocational and higher education);
- b. occupational qualifications ([10]), where individuals are issued a professional certificate, giving the evidence of knowledge, skills and competences required for working in a specific occupation or profession.

Qualifications in sub-frameworks are described in the corresponding national educational standards, which are learning-outcomes based:

- a. national curriculum for basic schools;
- b. simplified national curriculum for basic schools;
- c. national curriculum for upper secondary schools;
- d. standard of VET;
- e. standard of higher education ([11]);
- f. occupational qualifications standards.

Introducing a learning outcomes approach is an important part of the national reform programme for general education, VET and higher education; the topic is covered in various regulatory acts. Linked to this is increased focus on recognition of prior learning (RPL). Higher and vocational education are more advanced in implementing the learning-outcomes approach; this approach is not yet widely applied in general education but implementation is part of the lifelong learning strategy

(strategic goal: change in the approach to learning). The main challenge appears to be take-up among teachers and school administrators. While learning outcomes have been embedded in curricula for a long time, the focus in education delivery has been on process rather than learning outcomes. The role of employers could also be more extensive and constructive to derive full benefits from applying this approach (Cedefop, 2016).

Learning outcomes of different types of VET are described in the vocational education standard and correspond to levels 2 to 5 of the EstQF. The vocational education standard describes the requirements for national and school curricula, including objectives, expected learning outcomes, volumes of study and graduation requirements for different types of initial and continuous VET programmes, and requirements for pedagogical professionals. Learning outcomes are defined as occupation-specific knowledge and skills as well as transversal skills: communication; learning, social and entrepreneurial skills; self-awareness; independence and responsibility. Reform of VET curricula was launched in September 2013 and by September 2016, 20 new national VET curricula were approved (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016). Together with national curricula of the previous generation they cover the whole spectrum of specialities. VET institutions have initiated more than 600 learning-outcome-based new curricula. Since 2013, study volume in VET has been expressed using Estonian VET credit points.

The current national curricula in general education were gradually introduced between 2010 and 2013. They set out goals and objectives, expected learning outcomes, assessment criteria and requirements for the learning and teaching environment, graduation and school curriculum.

New study programmes based on learning outcomes were implemented in higher education as of September 2009. The Estonian standard of higher education refers to learning outcomes at basic level (outcomes that any graduate must achieve) and achievement of learning outcomes above the minimum level is differentiated by grading. The Universities Act ([12]) and the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act ([13]) now allow for accreditation of prior and experiential learning in higher education curricula.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education and Research and the Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) ([14]) are the main bodies in charge of developing and implementing the EstQF. The Qualification Authority was established in 2001 to develop a competence-based professional qualifications system ([15]), put in place in parallel to the formal education system under the Ministry of Education and Research. In 2010, by decision of the Ministry of Education and Research, the Qualifications Authority was nominated as the national EQF coordination point (EQF NCP) ([16]). The NCP is tasked with:

- a. organising the process of referencing the Estonian qualifications to EQF levels, ensuring the involvement of stakeholders and the transparency of the process;
- b. implementing principles ensuring quality of the referencing process agreed in Europe;
- c. informing all stakeholders and the public about referencing Estonian qualifications to the EQF levels and developments involving the Estonian qualifications framework;
- d. participating in the activities of the [NCPs network](#).

A broad-based steering committee was also established to ensure the involvement of all key stakeholders in NQF-related processes. It includes representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, State Chancellery, Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, Estonian Qualifications Authority, Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions, Estonian Employers' Confederation, Estonian Association of Pupils' Unions, Estonian Association of Student Unions, Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, and the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre. The mandate of the steering committee was first limited to the referencing process, but renewed in 2017 and 2018. The new mandate was expanded to the monitoring of the implementation of the EstQF and, if necessary, making proposals for amendments. The Qualifications Authority coordinates the 14 sector skills councils and provides technical support to the board of chairmen of these councils. Typically, institutions represented in sector skills councils are: employers' organisations in the sector; trade unions in the sector; professional associations in the sector; education and training

institutions; and responsible ministries. They are responsible for preparing, amending, renewing or approving professional standards, and for deciding on the linking of occupational qualifications to the EstQF. The board of chairmen of the sector skills councils coordinates cross-sectoral cooperation.

The Qualifications Authority also cooperates with other institutions, disseminates information and provides guidance and advice to various stakeholders on application of the framework. The dissemination of information and guidance on implementation of the framework are carried out mostly through partners and participants to the occupational qualifications system: the sector skills councils, professional examination committees, and experts. Different kinds of dissemination and information event are organised annually to share information with education providers, policy makers, and employer and employee organisations.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[17]

Validation practices in Estonia are well developed in the formal education sector. Higher education has been leading developments, with vocational education and training and general education following. The legal framework for validation is specific to the education level. There is no overall legislation to cover all education subsystems, regulated by sector-specific acts and regulations; each is responsible for its own development and implementation. The current model is fragmented and it could be difficult for potential applicants to find their way around the various systems that are sector-specific.

Development of the EstQF has supporting validation among its objectives, and the updated referencing report (September 2016) clearly signals this. For all qualifications included in the framework, the curricula and the relevant regulations of each subsystem ([18]) enable education providers to recognise non-formal and informal learning. A credit point system that conforms to the ECTS is used in higher education, and a credit point system that conforms to the ECVET is used in VET.

In the higher education legislative framework, from 2007 there has been no limitation on how many credits can be obtained via validation but higher education institutions cannot award whole diplomas or certificates on the basis of prior and experiential learning. In practice, this means that the whole of the curriculum may be recognised on the basis of prior learning, except for the thesis or final examination. For admission to higher education, a specified level of education needs to be achieved.

In VET, validation possibilities are wider: passing a professional exam (professional certificate issued) can replace the school leaving exam. Some learning outcomes in primary school may be recognised with agreement of a student's parents and school's representatives. Full occupational qualifications can be awarded through RPL.

Since the 2016 inventory the main focus of validation developments has been in the adult education section. The Adult education programme 2016-19 (*Täiskasvanuhariduse* programme) ([19]) has focused on adult gymnasiums and the development of validation practices for the needs of adult learners. Training has been provided to validation practitioners in

adult gymnasiums, vocational education and higher education institutions, and to occupation standards providers. Overall validation data collection is one of the targeted activities. As a result of recent developments, validation is present in all sectors and, in relation to Council recommendation on validation (2012), ([20]) it can be said that knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be validated.

The Higher education programme 2016-19 ([21]) features validation as a means for flexible study by supporting access to higher education for various groups of learners. The Vocational education programme 2016-19 ([22]) states that an increase in the number of validation applications is expected and assessment quality has improved. It is expected that validation-related initiatives will be supported in the future.

NQF implementation and impact

The Estonian NQF has reached full operational stage. The Ministry of Education and Research and the Estonian Qualifications Authority are the main bodies involved in its implementation. A legal and institutional framework was set up by the amended Professions Act of 2008 and key responsibilities and roles of different stakeholders have been agreed. Quality criteria for inclusion and positioning of qualifications in the framework have been adopted. The framework includes all State-recognised qualifications, which have to meet two basic criteria: to be defined in learning-outcomes-based qualifications standards (curriculum or professional standards) and to be awarded by nationally accredited institutions.

The EstQF is well established, especially the sub-frameworks for VET, higher education and occupational qualifications. General education is formally connected to the overarching framework through relevant State programmes but the substantive link and common awareness about learning outcomes and qualification levels is rather weak in this subsystem.

Implementation of the overarching framework has triggered discussions between stakeholders and has been used to identify gaps and imbalances in the provision of qualifications. For instance, EstQF level 5 was a focus of public debate from formal adoption of the overarching framework in 2008. The main discussion centred on the fact that there were no qualifications from initial education and training identified at this level, only occupational qualifications. The need for these types of qualification in the labour market, supported by different stakeholders, has impacted on policy decisions.

Following intense consultation with all stakeholders, a new VET Act came into force in mid-2013 ([23]), along with a new standard of VET. This substantially transformed the VET system and introduced qualifications at level 5 (both in initial and continuing VET); previously there were no initial education qualifications at this level. It also established a new quality assurance framework for VET and the Estonian VET credit system. It stipulates five types of VET qualification ([24]).

The framework has also been used to revisit current provision of professional higher qualifications referenced to EstQF level 6. It informs curriculum reform in VET and fine-tuning qualification descriptions from

VET and higher education with NQF level descriptors.

EstQF and EQF levels have been indicated on higher education and occupational qualifications (that meet the requirements for inclusion in the EstQF) since 2012, and on general education and VET qualifications since 2013. Including the EstQF and EQF levels on Europass diploma and certificate supplements is general practice. The levels are also indicated in national qualifications databases, such as the VET curricula database ([25]) and the register of occupational qualifications ([26]).

There are continuing discussions and plans to include EstQF and EQF levels in the envisaged new version of the Estonian education database (EHIS2).

There is no specific communication strategy. NQF implementation is foreseen in the Estonian lifelong learning adult education programme.

The Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) conducted a poll among employers and specialists about awareness and use of the EstQF. Employers are less aware of the EstQF than qualification certificate owners: only 30% of responders were well or very well acquainted with the EstQF, although the percentage among the certificate owners was 40%. The EstQF was used as promotional tool for occupation qualification certificates by half of occupational certificate owners and employers, and was useful for people reflecting on their qualifications and compiling their CV.

23% of responders have used the EstQF to guide employees to achieve a higher qualification level; 21% have used the EstQF to assess an applicant's qualification (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The results from the survey help the EQF NCP and the EQF steering group to plan their activities.

The NQF has varied influence in different areas:

- a. the EstQF has an influence on the promotion of learning outcomes, although not directly;
- b. according to available evidence and research so far, the EstQF and learning outcomes approach has not yet reached the aim of full permeability of education and training ;
- c. the impact and influence of the EstQF on the renewal and review and quality assurance of qualifications is growing;
- d. there is a moderate influence of the EstQF on dialogue with stakeholders as the level of occupation standard is negotiated

- between them and the level of occupational/professional standard is related to the level of qualification in the framework;
- e. the EstQF has a substantial influence in levelling foreign qualifications;
 - f. there is considerable EstQF influence on the parity of esteem and comparison between different types of qualifications (European Commission; Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

The EstQF was referenced to the EQF and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in October 2011. Following the 2013 VET reform, the referencing report was revised and presented to the EQF advisory group in 2015. In September 2016, an updated report was submitted, following the EQF advisory group recommendations.

Important lessons and future plans

One key objective of the EstQF is to improve comparability between formal school leaving certificates and occupational qualifications. Development of the framework and the referencing process have already contributed to this objective by building up a more coherent and responsive lifelong learning system. The process has been intense. As observed in the referencing report, 'a remarkable convergence' between the education system and the professional qualification system has taken place (Estonian Qualifications Authority et al., 2016).

Occupational qualifications that link lifelong learning with the labour market can be distributed on levels 2 to 8 of the EstQF, clearly indicating that it is not only higher education qualifications that can be assigned to levels 6 to 8 ([27]). Strict quality criteria have to be met: qualifications are based on professional standards and developed in cooperation with social partners, and awarding bodies have to be accredited. The relationship between occupational and VET qualifications was discussed in the EQF advisory group, covering how occupational qualifications differ and/or complement those awarded in the initial education system. There are two main ways to obtain vocational or occupational qualifications (*kutsekvalifikatsioon*) in Estonia: either via work experience and assessment against a professional standard or via a VET programme based on professional standards and broader educational objectives. Both types of qualification have the same value on the labour market. According to the Professions Act of 2008, both VET and higher education institutions which have curricula based on professional standards and are accredited against quality standards could apply to become an occupational qualifications awarding body. Some kind of convergence of these two systems is expected.

Current activities for occupational qualifications include development and implementation of monitoring, analysis and forecasting of labour market needs (quantitative and qualitative) during 2015-20 ([28]).

A new Adult Education Act ([29]) was adopted in 2015, aimed at increasing the quality of adult learning through introducing the learning outcomes approach into curriculum design and assessment.

According to the Estonian Qualifications Authority ([30]), the main challenge for the EstQF is recognition as a backbone of the national qualifications system and as a focal point of the system for lifelong

learning. This could be addressed by increasing awareness of the EstQF among end-users.

Main sources of information

- The Estonian Qualification Authority EQF NCP:
<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/>
- Information on qualifications and the EstQF:
<https://www.hm.ee/en/activities/qualifications>
- VET curricula database:
<https://enda.ehis.ee/avalik/avalik/oppekava/OppekavaOtsi.faces>
- Estonian education information system (EHIS):
https://www.eesti.ee/eng/services/citizen/haridus_ja_teadus/isikukaart_eesti_ee_portaali
- Estonian register of occupational qualifications (professions register) <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/et/kutseregister/tutvustus>
- Estonian Qualifications Authority et al. (2016). *Referencing of the Estonian qualifications and qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*.
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2015_referencing_report_revised.pdf

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral degree (Doktorikraad) Category Education qualifications Level 8 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: chartered engineer chartered architect	8
7	Master degree (Magistrikraad) Category Education qualifications Level 7 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: diploma engineer diploma architect	7

6	Bachelor degree (Bakalaureusekraad) Category Education qualifications	6
	Diploma of professional higher education (Rakenduskõrgharidusõppe diplom) Category Education qualifications	
	Level 6 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: engineer	
5	VET certificate, level 5 (5. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications	5
	Level 5 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: master carpenter construction site manager	

4	Upper secondary general education certificate (Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications Upper secondary VET certificate (Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications VET certificate, level 4 (4.taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications Level 4 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: IT specialist	4
3	VET qualification certificate, level 3 (3. taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications Level 3 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: carpenter	3

2	Basic education certificate (Põhikooli lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications Basic education certificate based on simplified curriculum (Põhikooli lihtsustatud õppekava lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications VET certificate, level 2 (without basic education requirement) (2.taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications Level 2 occupational qualification Category Occupational qualifications E.g.: cook assistant	2
1	Basic education certificate based on curriculum (for students with moderate and severe learning disabilities) (Põhikooli toimetuleku õppekava lõputunnistus) Category Education qualifications	1

Acronyms

ECTS	European credit transfer system
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
ENIC	European network of information centres
EQF	European qualifications framework
EstQF	Estonian qualifications framework
NARIC	national academic recognition information centres
NQF	national qualifications framework
RPL	recognition of prior learning
VET	vocational education and training

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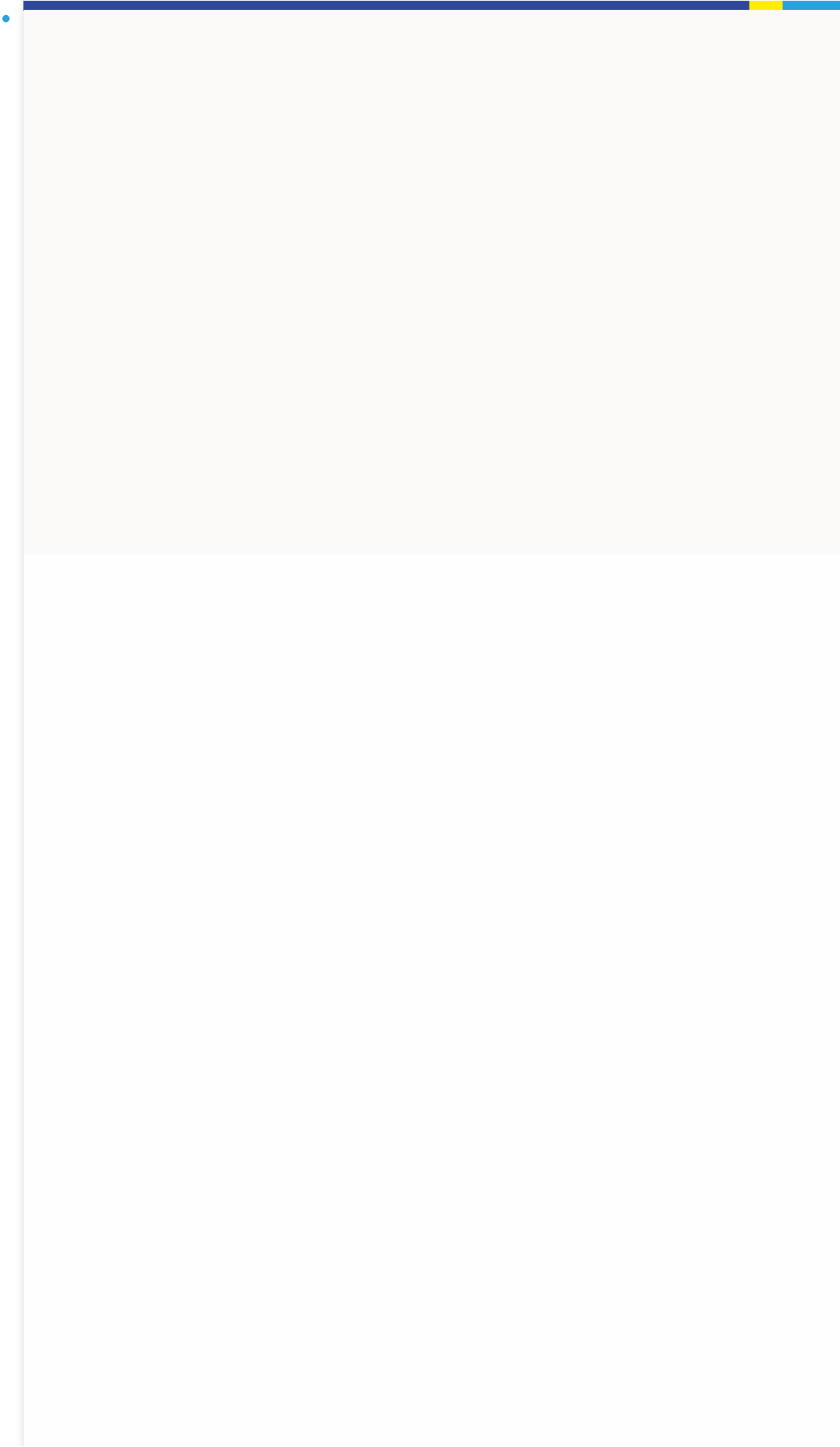
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