

NQF state of play



Malta 2022

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Overview

Stage of development: [Operational stage](#)

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes qualifications and awards at all levels acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Number of levels:

Eight plus two introductory levels A and B

Legal basis/stage of development:

Legal notice 294 on MQF for lifelong learning regulations (Subsidiary Legislation 327.431) (2012)
[\(in English\)](#)

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

[Malta qualifications database](#)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

In 2020, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (5.9 %) was well above the EU average (5.0 %). The country has relatively low participation in early childhood education and care (89.1 % in 2020), while the rate of early leaving from education and training, although significantly decreased in the last decade (18.8 % in 2011), remains higher than the EU average (10.7 % in 2021 versus 9.7 % for the EU-27). In 2021, tertiary education attainment (ages 25–34) (42.5 %) was higher than in the EU-27 (41.2 %) (European Commission. DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). Participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) is relatively low (27.6 % in 2020), while in short-cycle tertiary education 42.7 % of learners choose a vocational pathway ([1]). In 2020, the employment rate of VET graduates (25–34 years old) was 89.0 %, well above the EU average (75.7 %). Participation of adults in lifelong learning is also higher than the EU average (13.9 % and 10.8 % in 2021 respectively) (European Commission. DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

Already in the 2010s MQF was firmly integrated in the overall national qualification system, including links to relevant legislation and policy strategies, especially in the areas of education and employment. For instance, the framework for the 2014–2024 education strategy for Malta explicitly linked the MQF with promoting quality assurance and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a), and the national VET policy stated that the MQF was a milestone in enhancing VET, as it promoted parity of esteem and permeability between VET and general or academic education (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). More recently the 2021 guidelines on recognition of prior learning firmly linked the MQF to VNFIL (Section). The national strategy for further and higher education for 2030 (in legislative process) highlights the need for closer policy synergies between education, research and industry/enterprises, extending cooperation to the digital, health and environmental policy areas (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

1.2. NQF legal basis

The MQF is firmly legally embedded. Building on a 2005 legal notice, its legal basis as a regulatory framework for classification of qualifications

and awards was further strengthened in 2012 ([2]). To support implementation, two more legal notices on quality assurance and licensing of further and higher education institutions and programmes were prepared ([3]).

Policy objectives

The main objectives of the MQF are:

- a. aiding transparency and understanding of qualifications nationally and internationally;
- b. valuing all formal, informal and non-formal learning;
- c. improving consistency both internally and with European and international qualifications frameworks;
- d. promoting parity of esteem of qualifications from different learning pathways, including vocational and professional degrees and academic study programmes;
- e. lifelong learning, access and progression and mobility;
- f. a shift towards learning-outcomes-based qualifications;
- g. credit structure and units as qualification building blocks;
- h. the concept of mutual trust through quality assurance mechanisms running across all levels of the framework.

The MQF assists in making the country's qualifications system easier to understand and review, and more transparent at national and international levels. It also serves as a referencing tool that helps to describe and compare both national and foreign qualifications to promote the quality and transferability of qualifications in all types of education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The MQF has eight learning-outcomes-based qualification levels, plus the introductory levels A and B below EQF level 1. These two levels have no equivalence to the EQF and have been introduced to recognise any prior learning, as well as to provide a stepping stone towards MQF/EQF level 1 and further learning and employment ([4]). The MQF levels are described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, and are accompanied by a more detailed set of learning outcomes aimed at aiding the operationalisation of MQF requirements; these are defined in terms of knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, communication skills, judgemental skills, learning skills, autonomy and responsibility, with a strong focus on key competences.

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The MQF is a comprehensive framework covering all types of qualifications, including general, vocational, higher education and adult education, acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning ([5]). According to the 2016 referencing report (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2016a), there is a differentiation between qualifications, which are full degrees, and awards, which are short courses or partial qualifications ([6]); awards can even equal 1 European credit transfer and accumulation system / European credit system for vocational education and training credit point (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). According to Cedefop (2023), some awards could be considered a type of microcredential. Qualifications and awards should satisfy the following conditions to become accredited and included in the MQF (Government of Malta, 2012):

- a. be issued by nationally accredited institutions;
- b. be based on learning outcomes;
- c. be internally and externally quality assured;
- d. be based on a workload with a specified credit value;
- e. be awarded on successful completion of formal assessment

procedures.

Training programmes offered by further and higher education providers are accredited based on the MQF level and corresponding level descriptors ([7]); the number of such levelled programmes to the MQF continue to increase as more programmes are accredited annually by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) ([8]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The increased number (80) of national occupation standards (linked to the MQF levels) has led to an increased number of awards at MQF levels 1–5 (approximately 1 900) as a result of VNFIL (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

MQF provides a clear commitment to focus on the learning outcomes approach at policy level and in designing programmes and qualifications. Following the 2014–2024 education strategy framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a) and the 2020 national lifelong learning strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b), the country is experiencing a significant paradigm shift towards learning outcomes (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

In general education, the reform of the national curriculum framework has led to the development of learning outcomes for all subjects in compulsory education, promoting inclusion, diversity and citizenship. The 2016 learning outcomes framework ([9]) has supported the implementation of the national curriculum framework, which started in September 2019. The learning outcomes framework is intended to lead to more curricular autonomy for colleges and schools and give them the freedom to develop programmes that fulfil the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered a national education entitlement for all learners in Malta. The reform called My journey (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016) aims to change the one-size-fits-all approach in education, and to fight the marginalisation of low achievers by reducing the number of early school leavers. Since the school year 2015/2016 in lower secondary education and September 2019 in upper secondary education, the reform has allowed learners to opt for vocational subjects, in addition to the core curriculum (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Each attainment level in the framework comprises a list of learning outcomes, and/or grading criteria in the case of vocational subjects ([10]).

In VET, Malta is developing national occupational standards (linked to the MQF and the Malta qualifications database) to inform VET programmes

([11]). The MFHEA has published 75 national occupational standards, based on the learning outcomes approach (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). The MQF level descriptors are utilised in the drafting, reviewing and publishing of occupational standards in the following sectors: automotive, building and construction, hair and beauty, health and social care, hospitality and tourism, IT, and printing and digital media. Self-accredited ([12]) and licensed private VET providers, offering courses accredited by the MFHEA, use the learning outcomes approach in their course descriptions (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

In higher education, there are self-accredited ([13]) and licensed private higher education institutions, offering courses accredited by the MFHEA. Programmes developed in higher education are being remodelled based on learning outcomes (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2016a).

3.4. Quality assurance arrangements

The MFHEA operates as the national quality assurance agency and is an affiliate member of the [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#). In 2015, the MFHEA launched the national quality assurance framework for upper secondary and higher VET (IVET), including work-based learning (WBL) and continuing VET as well as further, higher and adult formal education ([14]). The framework includes internal quality assurance and periodic external quality audits, following the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area and the European quality assurance in VET indicators (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). The MQF is well embedded in the national quality assurance framework, as it has strong synergy with quality assurance standards that educational institutions must commit to in order to be accredited (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). A major aim of the framework is to enhance the implementation of the learning outcomes approach by education and training providers (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2016b). The MFHEA is revising the national quality assurance framework and the manual of procedures for auditing providers ([15]).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The MFHEA ([16]) is the EQF national coordination point (NCP) and operates, under the supervision of the Ministry for Education and Employment, as the authority responsible for all aspects of the MQF's implementation ([17]). The research and policy unit of the MFHEA is responsible for the day-to-day running of the MQF. The MFHEA also acts as the competent authority for licensing, accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of providers and programmes in further and higher education.

A wide range of stakeholders was involved in developing and setting up the MQF. In the implementation of the MQF, the MFHEA cooperates with the ministry's Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, which is responsible for quality assurance and standards in compulsory education. The MFHEA leads the development and implementation of occupational standards in cooperation with social partners, sector skills units and other stakeholders such as Jobsplus ([18]). Since September 2019, the MFHEA has set up an MQF working group made up of representatives from different national stakeholders, to assist in decision-making and guidance, and to support the development of the MQF. On an ad hoc basis, further involvement of stakeholders is sought mainly through surveys and the annual national colloquium. As an outward-looking framework, the MQF has enabled cooperation with stakeholders outside the country, such as the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership. The MQF is seen to have improved cooperation between stakeholders (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020, 2022).

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

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

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) can take place up to MQF level 5 (Gatt, 2018). The value and importance of VNFIL were emphasised and reinforced in the 2010s in several national policy documents such as the national youth policy (Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport, 2015) and the Malta national lifelong learning strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). VNFIL and the MQF share the objective of enabling individuals to advance based on achieved learning outcomes. Ensuring that the VNFIL system is geared up to meet each sector's needs is a constant challenge (Gatt, 2018).

The MFHEA is responsible for establishing and managing the VNFIL system, drafting guidelines aligned with the MQF and ensuring that the learning outcomes approach is used systematically (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). In agreement with the sector skills units ([19]), it does not implement validation itself but subcontracts other public or private entities such as Jobsplus. The country has developed occupational standards in vocational education (Section). There are 105 published occupational standards in eight different sectors that are used in VNFIL ([20]). The first that were published are being reviewed and updated to ensure that they are in line with the learning outcomes approach and MQF level descriptors. People who successfully achieve their validation assessment receive an award in their occupation, so the validation process is automatically linked to the MQF. The MFHEA has published guidelines on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and two leaflets promoting that VNFIL awards are levelled to the MQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). According to the guidelines, an overarching principle of the validation system is that RPL should always involve the use of the MQF in determining the level, volume and depth of evidence (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021a). Since 2020, more than 300 new VNFIL certificates have been issued, while VNFIL has increased in popularity and more resources have been devoted to this area (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

5.2. Recognition of foreign qualifications

The Qualifications and Recognition Information Centre (QRIC) is part of the MFHEA and responsible for providing information about the referencing and equivalences of foreign qualifications. It is also part of the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region and the National Recognition Information Centres in the European Union. The QRIC is often used by Maltese and foreign nationals (EU and non-EU) to reference their foreign qualifications: the centre receives a considerable number of requests to reference foreign qualifications to the MQF (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2016a).

5.3. Promoting lifelong learning

Accredited adult education courses levelled to the MQF enable adults to engage in lifelong learning and progress to higher MQF levels. One of the main aims of VNFIL is to increase lifelong learning and employability, as the awards obtained through VNFIL help candidates develop their careers or further their studies. The increased numbers of national occupational standards and of certificates acquired through VNFIL indicate promising developments in this area.

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The MQF is at operational stage, as it is a permanent and visible feature of education and training, improving the transparency and comparability of qualifications mainly by providing a map of, and references to, all nationally recognised qualifications, indicating MQF levels on certificates and diplomas and/or supplements, developing the Malta qualifications database, providing a reference point for development and review of standards and curricula, and supporting quality assurance mechanisms and VNFIL. The MQF also supports the system's reform and renewal.

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

MQF and EQF levels are usually indicated on general, vocational and higher education qualifications provided by public institutions. They are included in all newly developed accredited qualifications from private providers, and on Europass certificates and diploma supplements issued by public and private bodies ([21]). They are also mentioned in all qualifications in the Malta qualifications database (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.3. NQF dissemination

Europass/Euroguidance contact points cooperate and coordinate with the MFHEA. Regular meetings take place, and the three networks collaborate during dissemination events and on developing promotion materials. Through the QRIC, the MFHEA has established an effective network with employers to promote use of the NQF. Other methods of informing potential users about the framework include social media and the [MFHEA website](#), which is continuously updated. Dissemination targeting the public also takes place through information posters; leaflets/booklets; a 2021 video explaining the MQF, its level descriptors, the use of credits and the difference between qualifications and awards ([22]); an [interactive presentation](#) of the MQF; a [glossary of terms](#) commonly used in the context of further and higher education; and the Malta qualifications database (Section). The creation of an MQF logo, which was launched in August 2020, has given the framework more visibility. Guidelines on RPL (Section) target providers (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020, 2022).

6.4. Qualifications databases and registers

The Malta qualifications database ([23]) has been developed by the MFHEA, aiming to provide the public, education institutions, and other stakeholders at national and international levels with transparent and up-to-date information on licensed providers and accredited programmes. The database includes all MQF qualifications and awards (7 454 in total in December 2022), while it is regularly updated with the new courses accredited. It is connected to the Europass platform (via the qualifications dataset register). Detailed information, in English, on all elements mentioned in the 2017 EQF recommendation is available, including MQF/EQF level, field of study, description of each qualification, awarding body, internal and external quality assurance procedures, and relevant links. Learning outcomes descriptions included in the database should follow a specific structure: action verb, object and context (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

In February 2021, the MQF impact report was published. The report showed a high level of awareness of the MQF across most groups: 83 % of all respondents said that they were moderately/very aware of the framework, with 54 % saying that they were 'very aware'. However, awareness among learners is relatively low, as 42.3 % said that they were vaguely aware or had never heard of it and only 23.5 % said that they were very aware. Regarding the promotion of the MQF, educators (49 %) and those working in government agencies (40 %) are those most likely to have seen information regularly or frequently; 65 % of learners said that they had never or only rarely seen any information. Only a minority of respondents considered that the MQF was adequately promoted. Results are on the same lines as those of the relevant 2016 study (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b).

The MQF level is indicated in entry requirements for each training programme (as this is expected by the quality assurance standards), in prospectuses of training providers and on qualifications. This means that international and Maltese learners have access to MQF-related information when deciding on their studies or when they wish to go to study abroad. Learners often request recognition to ensure that their academic courses are levelled to MQF. There has also been a steady increase in the number of education institutions interested in getting their programmes accredited and thus levelled to the MQF. Regarding jobseekers, some private job postings and all those in the public sector indicate the MQF level required for application, so native and foreign

jobseekers should be aware of the MQF levels and check them. Guidance practices and policies, including guidance related to international students, have also incorporated the MQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Jobsplus also uses the MQF as its main criterion for issuing work permits ([24]), and MQF levels are used in incentive schemes such as scholarships and tax rebates (Cedefop, 2019).

In further and higher education, for a programme to be accredited it must be levelled to the MQF. This means that the MQF and the level descriptors are the basis on which study programmes are developed. The MQF level descriptors are also used in developing occupational standards (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The MQF is well embedded in the national quality assurance framework for further and higher education institutions (Section). Furthermore, VNFIL awards are levelled to the MQF (Section).

6.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

In 2021, the MFHEA in collaboration with the SCQF Partnership published the first in-depth review of the MQF (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b). The review examined aspects such as end user visibility and awareness among key stakeholders, the impact of the MQF on teaching and learning, curriculum design, learners' international mobility to and from Malta, and progression between levels and different education pathways. It covered a wide range of stakeholders through an online survey, focus groups and interviews.

6.7. Impact of the NQF

The MQF impact review showed that its impact on education design and development is positive. More than 70 % of the 225 educators who participated in the survey responded that the MQF had some positive or a very positive impact on them or their organisation in ensuring their learners are studying at the appropriate level, increasing the quality of qualifications/teaching, improving qualification and curriculum design, assigning credits, and levelling qualifications to MQF and accrediting them. A challenge was the difficulty in applying the MQF in vocational training, as some respondents mentioned that the wording of level descriptors fits higher education better and cannot fully capture the range of vocational learning, making it difficult for employers to understand learning outcomes that learners have achieved (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b).

Some 42 % of employers had used the MQF in a recruitment process,

usually with some positive impact, but employers' responses were less positive overall. Improved support for building the capacity of educators and employers is needed to enable them to get a deeper understanding of the MQF and use it better (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b). An important finding of the review is that approximately 50 % of educators perceived that the MQF has some or very positive impact on their cooperation with employers and those working in government agencies, and vice versa. This is an indication that the MQF offers a common language (which can be further improved) to ease cooperation between education and the labour market (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b).

Approximately 50 % of learners mentioned that the MQF had some positive or a very positive impact in motivating them to continue studying or helping them to apply for a job, better plan their career, prepare their CV and apply for courses. The review also revealed the potential and complexity of applying the framework in VNFIL. Some respondents even highlighted that the increased use of the MQF in recruitment will have a negative impact on holders of qualifications that pre-date the MQF and on those who gained their skills and competences through informal learning (MFHEA and SCQF Partnership, 2021b). Nevertheless, the MQF has contributed to laying a firm foundation for the implementation of VNFIL (Section).

There are indications that the MQF has promoted parity of esteem between different types of education, training and qualifications, as it is used for all types of qualifications and all education pathways. This has increased trust among different sectors and allows learners to move from one pathway to another more easily (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Referencing to the EQF

The MQF was referenced to the EQF and the qualifications framework in the European higher education area in a combined report in 2009. Updates were published in 2010, 2012 and 2016. The MQF is also referenced to the transnational qualifications framework of the small states of the Commonwealth.

The country aims for the MQF to remain responsive to the changing needs of society. An update of the referencing report is planned for 2023, as it has become important to deal adequately with flexible qualifications, VNFIL, microcredentials/awards, WBL and digital education and give them due consideration in the referencing report so they are well integrated and regulated in the Maltese education system. This comes just after the MFHEA launched the national guidelines for RPL and the national guidelines for digital education, and the launch of the WBL and Apprenticeship Act (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Important lessons and future plans

The MQF is operational and an important element of the national education, training and qualifications system. It improves the transparency and comparability of qualifications, supports reform and renewal, and addresses key challenges in education, training and the labour market. The MQF includes qualifications, which are full degrees, and awards, which are short courses or partial qualifications (some of them could be considered microcredentials) acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning.

A major success factor is that policies promoting the implementation of the MQF, lifelong learning, VNFIL and quality assurance in education and training are strongly consistent with each other. Thus, the MQF has been an important tool in implementing policies in these areas. It has also contributed to increasing parity of esteem and permeability between VET and general or academic education. The MQF has supported the shift towards learning outcomes, while in further and higher education only programmes levelled to the MQF can be accredited, making the framework and its level descriptors the basis for developing study programmes and occupational standards.

The MQF impact review showed an overall high level of awareness of the MQF. However, only a minority of respondents considered that the MQF is adequately promoted. Furthermore, although MQF levels are indicated in entry requirements for each training programme, in prospectuses of training providers and on qualifications, the review showed that learners are less aware of the framework than other stakeholders are. This may indicate that different communication tools should be used. The Malta qualifications database is expected to further raise awareness of the MQF and provide stakeholders with detailed and up-to-date information on MQF qualifications and awards.

The review showed that educators consider that the MQF has, overall, a positive impact on increasing the quality of qualifications/teaching, and improving the design of qualifications and curricula. Approximately one out of two learners mentioned that the MQF had a positive impact on them, for instance in developing their CVs and choosing a course. Although improved support for building the capacity of educators and employers is needed to enable them to get a deeper understanding of the MQF and use it better, there are indications that the MQF has contributed to fostering cooperation between them.

Despite the improvements brought about by the development and introduction of the MQF, there are still issues to be addressed. The main future challenges lie with the further promotion of the MQF and dealing adequately with flexible qualifications, VNFIL, microcredentials/awards, WBL and digital education. Updating the referencing report is a priority.

Main sources of information

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National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral degree	8
7	Master's degree Postgraduate diploma Postgraduate certificate	7
6	Bachelor's degree	6
5	Undergraduate diploma Undergraduate certificate VET higher diploma foundation degree Category VET	5
4	Matriculation certificate Advanced level Intermediate level VET diploma Category VET A VET diploma should enjoy the same parity of esteem as the matriculation certificate	4
3	General education (level 3) SEC grade 1 to 5 VET level 3 Category VET A VET level 3 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as six secondary education certificate (SEC) subjects at grades 1 to 5.	3

2	 General education (level 2) SEC grade 6-7 VET level 2 Category VET A full VET level 2 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as four secondary education certificate (SEC) subjects at grade 6 and 7.	2
1	 General education (level 1) School leaving certificate VET level 1 Category VET A full VET level 1 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as a full secondary school certificate and profile (SSC&P) Level 1.	1
B	 Introductory level B These are not yet included in legislation. They were introduced with the 2016 version of the referencing report.	No EQF level
A	 Introductory level A These are not yet included in legislation. They were introduced with the 2016 version of the referencing report.	No EQF level

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
MFHEA	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority
MQF	Malta qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
QRIC	Qualifications and Recognition Information Centre
RPL	recognition of prior learning
VET	vocational education and training
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning
WBL	work-based learning

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Related content

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2022

Malta - European inventory of NQFs 2022

European inventory of NQF

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