



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

Supporting the comparison and recognition of qualifications

Outcomes of the ReferNet survey

Cedefop's longstanding work on comparison of qualifications

- Learning outcomes
- European qualifications framework (EQF)
- National qualifications frameworks (EQF)
- Comparison of qualifications
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning
- ...



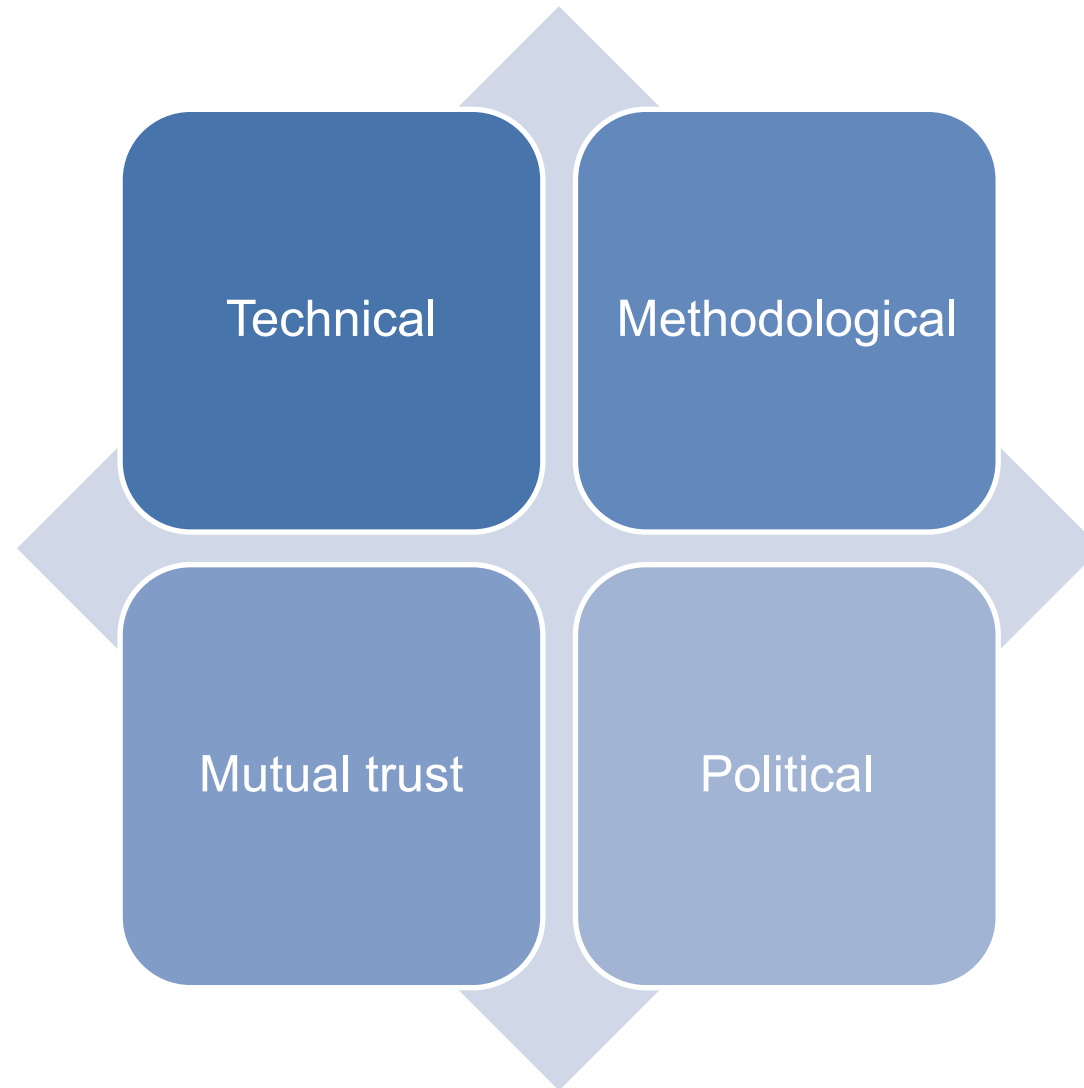
Cedefop, 2024

Over the past 20 years, European policy initiatives have:

- Increased the focus on learning-outcomes
- Increased attention to learning outside formal settings
- Promoted convergences across initiatives and countries
- Promoted commitment to transparent, comparable and recognised qualifications
- Emphasised the need for more flexible learning pathways



Challenges in comparing and recognising qualifications



2023-24: Comparing and recognising qualifications and learning outcomes

1. How do the procedures for comparing and recognising vocational qualifications and learning outcomes work in each country?
2. How can countries be supported in their efforts to improve comparison and recognition processes?
3. How are the current instruments and tools used to compare and recognise qualifications in each country?
4. In what ways can these instruments and tools be improved?

Study's scope: qualifications defined as part of each country's VET, incl. post-secondary and higher VET qualifications.

Methods: ReferNet survey

Data collection:

- ReferNet meeting (February 2024) and draft survey discussed (April 2024)
- Finalised survey, incl. 6 open-ended questions, was sent out (26 April 2024)
- All MS plus Norway (except Spain, Luxembourg and Malta) responded to the survey

Data analysis:

- Responses were textually analysed per country and combined across all countries for each question.
- Clarifying questions were sent to some countries for further clarification when necessary.
- Additional material provided by countries or referred to in responses was also considered in the analysis.
- Existing knowledge within CEDEFOP supported the analysis.

Survey results

- **Governance of recognition practices**
- **European and national tools**
- **Suggestions to improve the tools**
- **Comparison and recognition practices**
- **AI and digitalisation**

Governance of recognition practices

- **Numerous competent authorities** across countries
 - Some aim to **streamline processes and foster a cohesive approach** (e.g. improve information services, shared data and co-operation)
- **Based on the purpose of the comparison**, there is differentiation between regulated and non-regulated professions, and further studies
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- **National legislation, instructions, and strategies** serve as guidance
- **Collaboration with industry and labour market actors** is evident
- Limited information on the **role** and of VET providers (compared to HE)

European and national tools

In all countries, the following tools are utilised:



Professional qualifications Directive

All countries use it for qualification recognition (regulated professions)



Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)

- All countries have ratified it and use it in connection with HE
- Some countries apply its principles to VET



EQF/NQF

- To define the level of (foreign) qualifications
- Referencing of the NQFs to EQF is a requirement
- NQF often employed for comparison purposes
- Use of national descriptors is less common
- Specific learning outcomes: important!



Europass

- Overall considered as useful digital tool for obtaining information on qualifications
- Diploma Supplement and Certificate Supplement considered useful tools



EQF and NQF are
the primary tools for
supporting
comparison

European and national tools used by countries:

Recommendation on Automatic Recognition

- Mentioned in many responses, mostly in **connection with HE**
- Need to enhance clarity of terms and deepening understanding (e.g., difference between AR and admission arrangements)

ESCO

- Mentioned in connection with EURES, Europass, national databases, and qualification standards
- **Divided views on its potential** as a comparison tool with conditions (e.g. AI-supported matching tools) *or* too detailed and not fitting into national systems

European Learning Model (ELM)

- Countries have only recently started mapping exercises
- Few countries report on its potential for comparing qualifications

ReferNet's suggestions to improve tools

1

Databases/registers of qualifications and recognition decisions

- Transparent, accurate, user-friendly, and digitally accessible information on qualifications and qualification systems in English, with quality translation
- Easy access to national databases on qualifications and their learning outcomes
- Implementation of guidelines on short qualification descriptors
- Databases of recognition decisions/statements

2

Integrating tools and information

- Work on interoperable qualifications databases
- Creation of an EU-wide database of EQF qualifications and a mechanism for automatic recognition
- A single point of information on qualifications, learning outcomes, labour skills, shortages in the labour market - integration of EQF, ESCO and Europass

3

Verification

- Digital credentials verifiable through national registers/databases
- Digital tools for verification of documents (qualifications, recognition statements, etc)



ReferNet's suggestions to improve tools

4

EQF and Europass

- Greater alignment of qualifications frameworks across the EU
- Further standardisation & digitalisation of the Europass documents (format and content)
- Automatic suggestion of EQF equivalency levels
- Issuing certificate supplements in a widely spoken language, with personal information
- Development of e-seal certificate and diploma supplements

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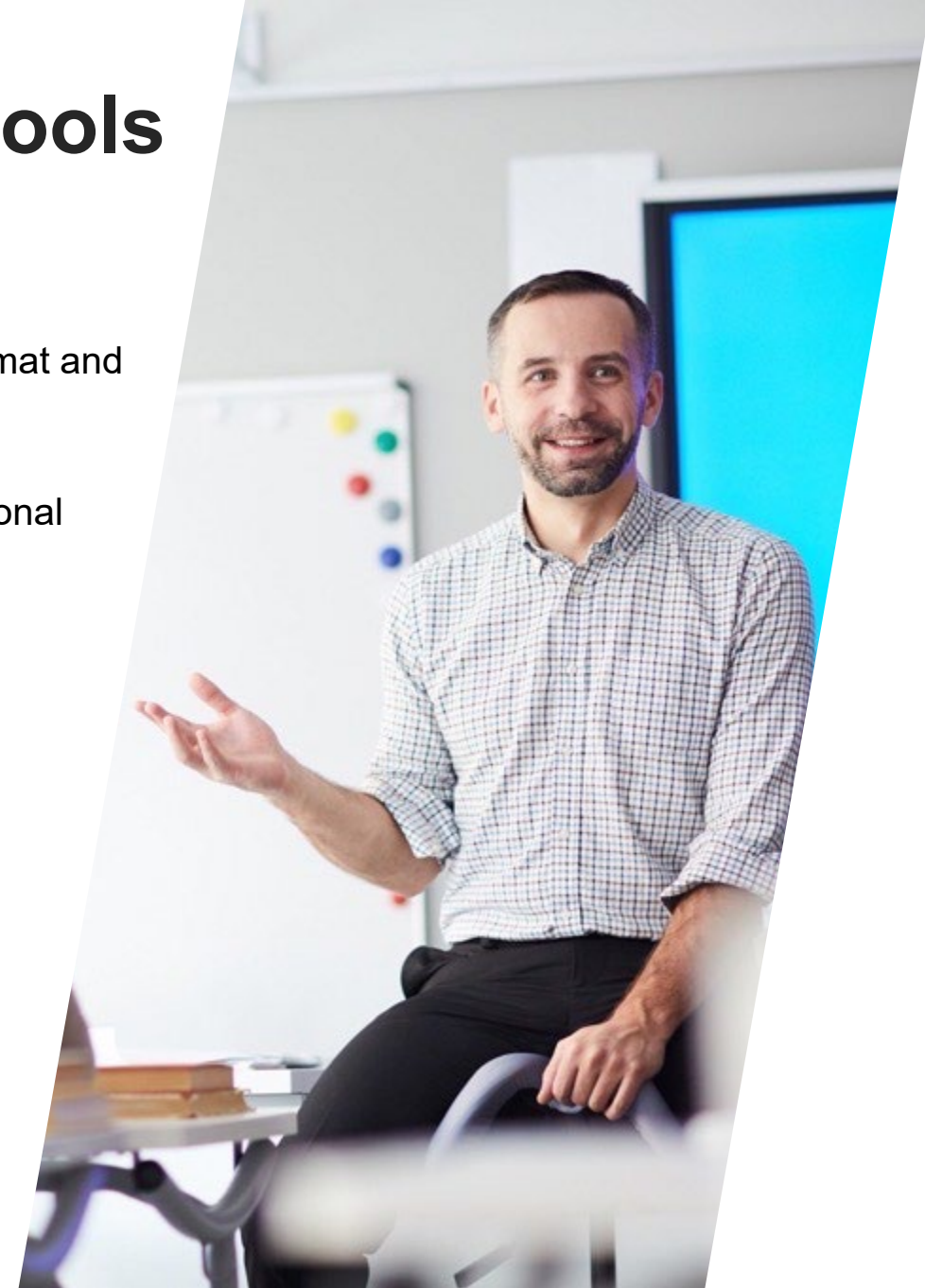
Professional Qualifications Directive

- Make Regulated Professions Database more user-friendly
- Extend it to third countries, such as ETF countries
- Wider application of Common Training Frameworks

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Promotion and awareness

- Increase awareness of EU tools



ReferNet's suggestions to improve tools

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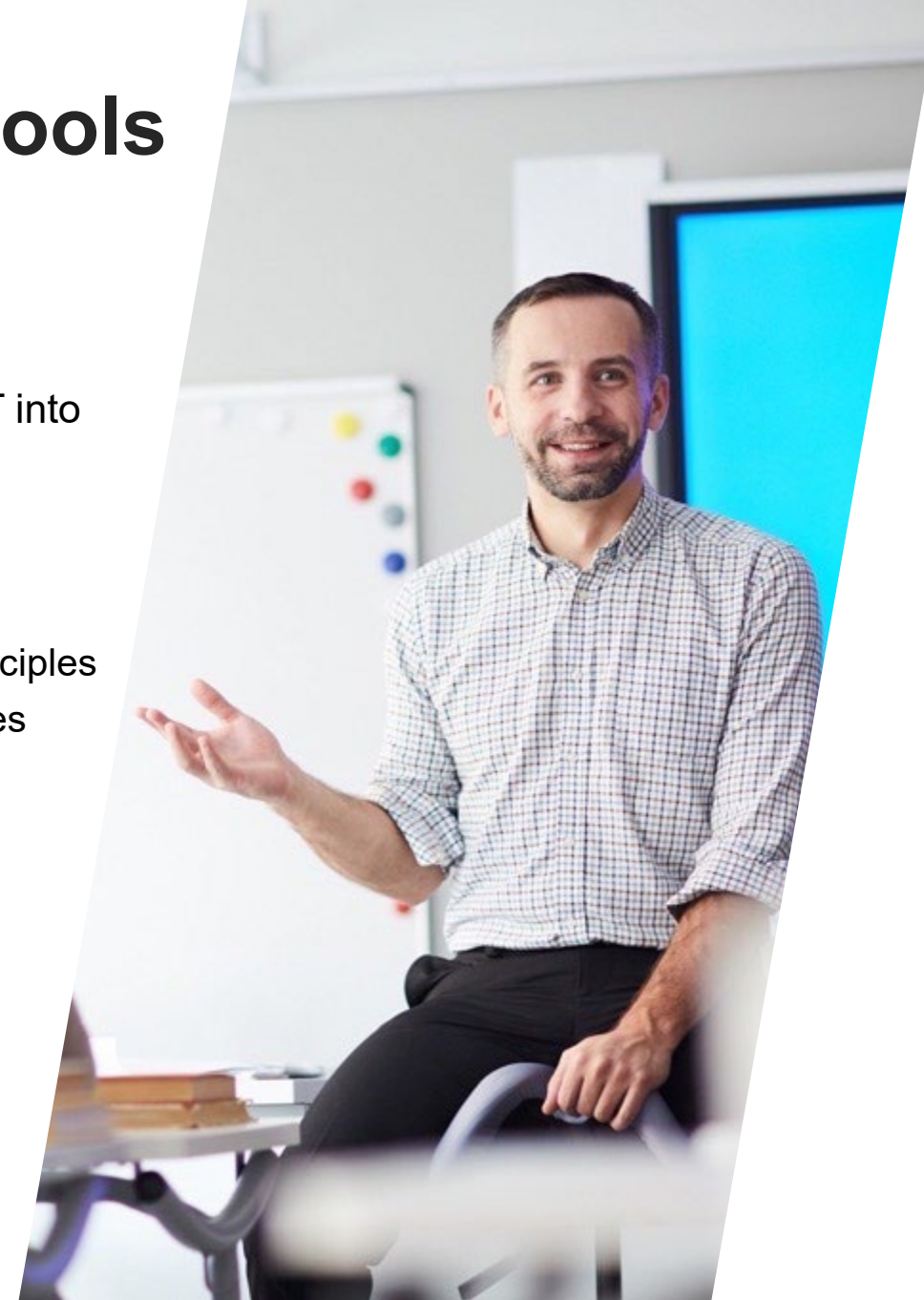
Networking, capacity building and professional training

- Dedicated network for comparing VET, such as NARIC and EU Assistance Centres/PQF as possibilities or models, or adding VET into their tasks

8

Development of common framework and European guidelines

- Best practice sharing and common guidelines to develop common principles
- Development of common frameworks for recognising learning outcomes



Recognition practices: How do countries compare?

- **Case-by-Case analysis and recognition**
- **Automatic recognition appears to be rare**
- **Exceptions** under the PQD or bi-/multilateral government agreements
- **National qualifications** (or professions, occupational standards) are used
- **EQF and NQF descriptors** as supporting evidence
- **Additional factors and requirements** may be requested
- **Through supported assessment** (e.g. expert commissions/panels)



Factors and criteria for comparison/recognition

Context-related

- Legal basis
- Qualification systems as a whole

Institution-related

- Status of the institution in the country of origin

Quality-related

- Mutual trust
- Authenticity of documents, qualifications

Qualification (or programme) related

- Status/title of the qualification
- NQF/EQF level
- Rights, credits (and duration)
- Subjects and program structure
- Practical training
- Learning outcomes

Additional factors

(mentioned seldom and pointing to some rigidity)

- Allocation of (weekly) hours for each subject and school year
- Attendance records
- Grading system
- Marks/grades of the applicant
- Form of studies (full-time, part-time)
- Language proficiency
- Age

The role of learning outcomes

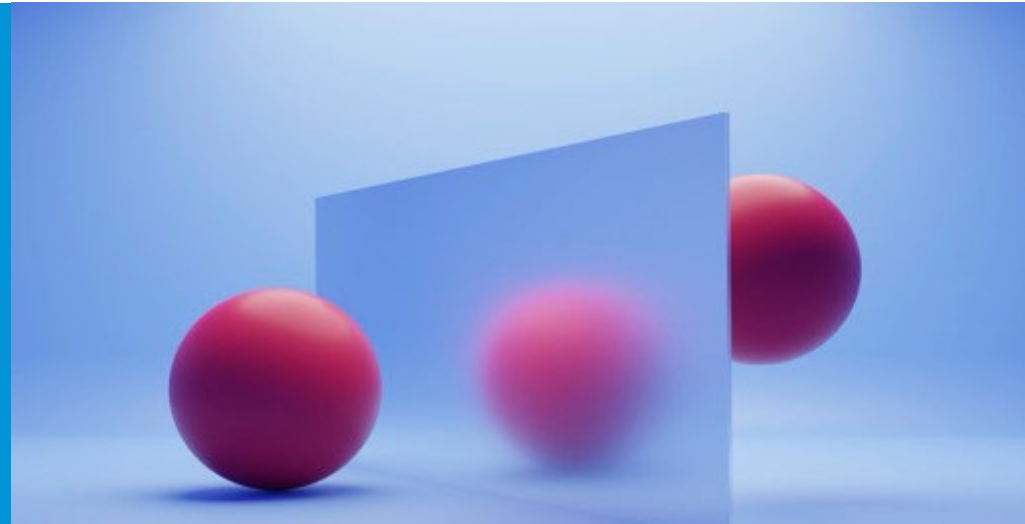
- Frequent **reference** to curricula, programmes and learning outcomes
- Learning outcomes **used to define the NQF level** of the qualification
- Balance occupation-specific (professional) skills/ general subjects / and transversal skills not visible → Most **attention on occupation-specific skills**.

Challenges:

- Differences in quality and granularity of descriptors;
- Generality of learning outcomes;
- Challenges in using learning outcomes for all learning;
- Translation issues;
- Comparison of the content/learning outcomes is considered labour-intensive.

Concept of ‘substantial difference’

- Well known-concept, but little information on what it implies in practice
- Some countries use the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention definition
- “Limits” related to: content, duration, equivalency exams



“substantial differences are only those differences between the foreign qualification and the national qualification that are so significant that they would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in the desired activity (further study or employment).” - UNESCO Global Recognition Convention

Outcomes of comparison

- **Positive, negative or conditional decision** is given to the applicant; big variation in the "title" of the document
- Contents of the document vary
 - Comparability of levels
 - More detailed analysis of learning outcomes, content, profile, credits etc.
 - Comparison with a national qualification or profession
 - Rights given/legal effects (in case there are)
 - Description of (foreign) qualification without judgement of actual comparability
- In some cases, also **supplementary documentation** ("next steps") is given either for the applicant or to be used also for possible further employer.
- **Clarity** and **uniformity** of the document important

Monitoring and follow up

- **Statistics** (e.g. about the implementation of the PQD)
- **Annual monitoring reports** about their recognition activities, reports on e.g. numbers of applicants, handling times, qualifications, awarding countries.
- **User surveys** about the customer satisfaction.
- Only few countries have made surveys about **the effect/impact** of the comparison/recognition for the applicant and/or the employer.

Third countries

- Some countries have observed a **significant rise in the number of applications** acquired in third countries over recent years.
- Most countries **don not make difference** (MS-third countries) in their comparison.
- **Exception:** If the purpose is access to a regulated profession and the PQD applies.
- Sometimes process can be **lengthier and more thorough**.
- Some countries **require additional documents** (e.g. apostille or Embassy verifications).
- When feasible, **EU tools are being used**. Some mentioned the need of introducing EU tools also for third countries and/or the usefulness of alignment of 3rd country's qualification framework to the EQF.
- The lack of information and attesting the authenticity and legal validity of the documents were mentioned to be specific **challenges**.



AI and language models

- Currently, seen more as a potential than real support
- Some preconditions:
 - Accessibility and completeness of national **databases/registers** of education documents
 - Qualifications should be **described** in enough detail and information **structured** comparably
 - More certainty of **usability** and **reliability**
 - More advanced **digitalisation of data**



Concluding remarks

- General views on **political, technical and methodological challenges** were confirmed (e.g. definitions of terms)
- **In-country similarities (e.g. recognition purpose, regulated/non-regulated and further study)**, even if the overall picture may appear complex.
- **Practice/methods in the recognition of HE qualifications** is in some countries considered as a model for comparing VET.
- Need for **formal recognition outside regulated professions** is considered small – but can be important for individuals
- **Need to simplify, accelerate, and standardise** the comparison of VET qualifications on national or stakeholder level is emphasised.
- Need for an **overarching** approach for comparison among Member States, and for effective implementation and coherence between transparency tools and initiatives
- **Limited studies/follow-up** on the impact of comparison for individuals or labour market.
- **Narrowing and blurring gap** between recognition of qualifications and validation.

Implications and next steps

- Further discussion on **the comparison/what is looked at** is needed.
- How to ensure **external legitimacy and/or quality** of comparison?
- Are basic **conditions of trust between qualification systems** already established?
- How to **benefit more from AI**?
- Many countries are committed **to improve their processes** nationally and/or via cooperation:

Are **European guidelines** possible and needed?

Under which circumstances and what would this require?

Taking work further

- **Discussion** with ReferNet Partners - November 2024
- **Discussion** in the EQF Advisory Group - first half of 2025
- **Webinar** on comparability and recognition of VET qualifications - first half of 2025
- CEDEFOP **working paper** combining analysis of ReferNet answers with mapping of transparency tools - first half of 2025
- Follow up **project** - 2026

Thank you

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Project page:

Comparison and recognition of learning outcomes:

www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/comparing-vet-qualifications



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