

A study into the early utilisation of the European Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Asylum and Reception Officials

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EUAA Training and Professional Development Centre

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List of abbreviations

Term	Definition
CAWG	Certification and Accreditation Working Group
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESQF	European Sectoral Qualifications Framework
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EU	European Union
EU+ countries	Member States of the European Union and associated countries
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
MS	Member States of the European Union





Executive summary

Learning in the asylum and reception sector is a niche domain, in that there are no formal education programmes offered in the EU that specifically address the learning needs of actors working in the field of international protection. The development of a European sectoral qualifications framework is a first step in addressing this situation. This qualitative study used in-depth interviews and a focus group to explore the early utilisation of the European Sectoral Qualifications Framework for asylum and reception officials (ESQF).

Following the research, it was identified that the utilisation of the ESQF had prompted significant reform and development at the levels of pedagogy, institution, and sector policy. That reform was welcomed by participants, notwithstanding the challenges of workload and an ongoing need for strengthening capacity and quality assurance measures. The framework was found to be multi-faceted with the potential to act as the basis for collaboration with similar sectors and an exemplar for sectors where learning needs are not reflected in national formal learning institutions. It was further noted that the ESQF is not only perceived as a useful referencing tool for levelling, transparency, and mobility purposes, but also as a driver for enhancing occupational competence by ensuring that training is fit-for-purpose.





Introduction

The significant shift to learning outcome-oriented education and training has been underway for over two decades, driven to a large extent by regional and national qualifications frameworks (Auzinger et al 2016). Organising learning outcomes into frameworks was seen as providing flexible routes to achieve qualifications (Keevy, Chakroun, and Deij, 2011). In Europe, the shift to learning outcomes is inextricably linked with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with referenced national qualifications frameworks, education reform, quality assurance and mechanisms for learning credit accumulation and transfer through a variety of instruments and tools.

Qualifications frameworks are now a truly global phenomenon (Cedefop/European Training Foundation, 2019; McBride and Keevy 2010), with a common purpose of referencing qualifications to improve transparency and coherence, enabling the recognition of all forms of learning, mobility of learning and the promotion of lifelong learning (Keevy, Chakroun, and Deij, 2011). The focus on the outcome of learning, regardless of how the learning took place is viewed as a method to address the barriers between traditional academic and vocational systems, and between formal learning systems, informal and non-formal learning, in which employers could play a significant role (Young 2005). The opportunity of flexible learning routes to transparent and recognised qualifications offers significant potential to employment sectors, particularly those that require learning that is not offered in formal education and training systems.

Skjerve, Zahilas and Mouillour (2009) suggest that the emergence of European and international sectoral qualifications frameworks reflects the need for increasing the labour market relevance of qualifications and providing training and qualifications tailored to the specific needs of sectors and companies. Indeed, it was foreseen that the EQF would enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to the common European reference point and thus be able to demonstrate the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems. However, early initiatives at sectoral level were diverse in scale and scope and tended towards specific qualifications related to occupational profiles or were oriented to competence frameworks of performance expectations (Skjerve, Zahilas and Mouillour, 2009) rather than qualifications frameworks.

Two subsequent comparative studies of sectoral qualification frameworks identified a continuance of this trend. Hupfer and Spöttl (2014) analysed five frameworks, predominantly competence-based, concluding that they were so different that they could neither be compared or clustered due to sector specificity. Critically, the study highlighted the challenge of aligning competences with levels of the EQF. In a larger study of international sectoral qualifications systems and frameworks, Auzinger et al (2016) found similar results. Of 254 organisations that managed one or more international sectoral initiatives, half were expressed in terms of learning outcomes and only eight considered to meet the provided definition of a sectoral qualifications framework, with some described as competence frameworks that were qualifications frameworks and vice versa. The conflation of competence frameworks with qualifications frameworks or the synonymous use of the terms *learning outcome* and *competence* is





problematic in the context of the systems in place for the quality and recognition of qualifications.

There are many definitions and meanings ascribed to the term competence, some of which are narrow and some very broad. Importantly for frameworks, some definitions relate to a specific type of learning such as skills and other definitions are broad enough to encapsulate all types of learning (Kennedy, Hyland and Ryan, 2009). Thus, competence frameworks have the potential to be vastly different in terms of how or what is expressed, as reported by Hupfer and Spöttl, (2014), challenging comparability. A second issue is that occupational competence frameworks tend to reflect the organisation or sector hierarchy, identifying the competences required for promotion or transfer. Peres and Norris (2016) described the challenge of differentiating the hierarchy of competences in professional ranks or job roles with the hierarchy of complexity of learning in the EQF. More responsibility in occupational terms does not always equate to more complex learning. Whilst there are no defined criteria and procedures for the construction of international sectoral qualifications frameworks, they should at a minimum be expressed in terms of learning outcomes, structured into clear levels that enable the referencing of qualifications to the EQF. The main difficulty in conflating competence and qualifications frameworks is limiting the understanding of the benefits and challenges that each instrument offers a sector.

The supporting documentation of published international sectoral qualifications frameworks, (EEAS, 2021; Correia, Sánchez and Fernandez, et al 2019; ECGFA Net 2019; Aardema, and Churruca, 2014; EUAA, 2021; Frontex, 2013) and the results of the relevant analysis by Auzinger et al (2016) set out three types of intended purpose for the development of frameworks. Firstly, all of the published frameworks include intended purposes that mirror the functions of national and regional qualifications frameworks in terms of mobility, comparability, quality and standards. Then, there are specific sectoral aims such as enabling harmonisation and interoperability across countries, mapping competences and addressing skill gaps. An important third purpose relates to professionalisation within the sector where the framework is intended to form a basis for professional certification or a tool to enable the formalisation of education and training within sectors where there is a lack of formal provision and recognition.

Whilst there are regular updates published on the implementation of national and transnational qualifications frameworks (FT 2019, Cedefop, 2021) little has been published on how or if the implementation of international sectoral initiatives has met expectations. Keevy, Chakroun, and Deij, (2011) point out that qualifications frameworks are far more than a matrix of learning outcomes as evidenced in the initial sector motivations to develop a qualifications framework, which go beyond the framework as a referencing tool. Therefore, the metrics which are used to evaluate the development of national and transnational frameworks are often too limited for evaluating sector level frameworks which may have a wider scope. Ure (2019) posits that learning outcomes are instruments of pedagogy, policy and institutions. Taking these three perspectives may better elucidate the potential of sectoral qualifications frameworks.

Originally framed as a pedagogical tool, the use of learning outcomes over objectives marked a mooted paradigm shift from input to output oriented, or learner centred education (Sin 2014, Cedefop 2010, Adam 2004). It is noted that learning outcomes remain a contested concept (Allais, 2012; Prøitz, Havnes, Biggs and Scott, 2017, Hussey and Smith, 2008), predominantly





from the perspective of higher education. Nonetheless, from vocational and professional learning perspectives. Prøitz (2010) suggests that the dominant debate on learning outcomes orients around the specificity and measurability of the outcome, where constraining the learning to specific, concrete assessable outcomes is restrictive for the learner and the learning process. Whilst the learning outcome debate raises important issues, the context and purpose of the specific learning should also be considered, as in some professional training contexts the precise, measurable type of learning outcome may be more desirable.

Although the concept of learning outcomes is debated, there is little dispute that they are a dominant feature of curriculum design and pedagogical instruments that should inform learners, teachers, programmes, modules, sessions, learning content, assessments and quality enhancement measures. There is evidence that the introduction of learning outcomes clearly impacts curriculum and programme developments, but the effect on teachers and learners appears to be limited (Cedefop 2016; Halász, 2017). Consequently, it could be expected that the implementation of a sectoral qualifications framework should have some impact on the pedagogical elements in the sector although the stated motivations for development relate more to policy than pedagogy.

Learning outcomes are placed at the centre of national and transnational political and policy instruments (Ure, 2019) in the EU and beyond. Examples are the EQF and national qualifications frameworks, the implementation of Bologna and Copenhagen processes in higher and vocational education and training, and the tools to support the mobility and recognition of learning. This view is exemplified by the Executive Director of Cedefop stating that “learning outcomes must be the glue of European tools and initiatives in the pursuit of increasing the transparency of skills, of qualifications and of systems” (Cedefop 2022b). In this context, learning outcomes are central to the reform of systems, expanding them from input regulation based on the resources put into the system, to results oriented output regulation (Cedefop 2010). The output regulation of learning systems expands the responsibility of the institution from providing learning resources, to being accountable for the results of the learning process (Cedefop, 2010), as is evidenced in the European higher and vocational quality assurance processes that consider levels of input such as programmes, staff, learning support, physical resources, policies and processes, as well as outcomes such as assessment performance, qualifications awarded and completion rates.

Given the impact of learning outcome related policy on institutions and providers, Ure (2019) suggests that it is useful to frame learning outcomes as an organisational instrument. This organisational instrument impacts internal processes, the management of quality control, along with the introduction of internal and external evaluations, appraisal and accountability which in turn affect the competence profiles of the staff employed in the organisations that deliver and manage the learning process (ibid). Indeed, Spöttl and Windelband (2013) provide evidence of this in a detailed account of the impact of restructuring the occupational profiles and curricula as an exemplar within a national vocational context that should be equally expected at sectoral level.





The hierarchy of specificity in learning outcome definition from EQF level down through qualifications, programmes, modules to session level intersects EU and national policy, learning provider policy and pedagogy offering systemic coherence. However, just as the role of learning outcomes in pedagogy has been challenged, the level of coherence of learning outcomes as a reform tool in policy has also been questioned. It has been suggested that learning outcomes alone are insufficient as an instrument to drive coherence in policy (Lassnigg, 2012), that the expectations of policy cohesion were perhaps unrealistic (Bohlinger, 2019), that national and institutional contexts intervene in the ultimate application of learning outcomes in programmes (Michelsen et al 2016; Prøitz, et al 2017; Helgøy and Homme, 2019) and that EQF driven policy cohesion could, but is yet to be, fully realised given its complexity (Elken, 2015).

That the EQF and learning outcomes has driven policy reform is not disputed but could be viewed as incomplete. In the context of international sectoral qualifications frameworks, there is yet to be policy on how they can be integrated into broader education reform and aligned to the EQF (Auzinger et al, 2016). Moreover, the impact at policy level within the specific sector is unknown but may be sector specific.

The effects of learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks are predominantly viewed from the perspectives of higher and vocational education and training sectors whilst little is known about the impact of learning outcomes on pedagogy, policy and providers within economic sectors. There is potential for international sectoral qualifications frameworks to contribute to the reform or development of learning systems, particularly in sectors that do not fit comfortably in national education systems. Given the dearth of research in this area, this exploratory study aims to contribute to the understanding of this potential in the context of a specific economic sector.

Context of the current study

Learning in the asylum and reception sector is a niche domain, in that there are no formal education programmes offered in the EU that specifically address the learning needs of actors in the field of asylum and reception. This situation is unlikely to change due to the distribution of limited numbers of potential learners in each EU+ country and the dynamic nature of the learning field necessitating regular updates to training materials. As such, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) mandate specifically defines the agency's responsibilities in respect of training (Regulation (EU) 2021/2303¹).

The EUAA was created and expanded to be the European centre of expertise on asylum. It is responsible for contributing to ensuring the efficient and uniform application of Union law on asylum in Member States, facilitating and supporting the activities of Member States in the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (Regulation (EU) 2021/2303). The Agency is also tasked with improving the functioning of the Common European Asylum System including providing operational and technical assistance to Member States in particular those whose asylum and reception systems are under disproportionate pressure. The need to support

¹ [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2303 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation \(EU\) No 439/2010](#)





the ‘uniform’ application of law has implications for the learning outcome issues discussed earlier.

The Agency is mandated to establish, develop and review training for national authorities responsible for asylum and reception matters, relevant national authorities, members of courts and tribunals and members of Agency staff. Therefore, there is a broad range of target learners with career-long learning needs, stipulated in a range of legal directives that underpin the Common European Asylum System.

One of the key tools for achieving its mandate in relation to training and convergence of action across the EU is the European Asylum Curriculum. The foundations for the curriculum are robust, initially pre-dating the existence of the agency with the first common core modules being developed as a Member State initiative (EAC, 2006). Over the years the curriculum has naturally expanded towards a suite of knowledge, skill and work-based modules targeting skills and competences designed to support convergence at the point of application of knowledge and development of skills. These modules are complemented with learning activities. The subject areas of the curriculum include: topics related to international and European fundamental rights standards, international and European law on asylum, issues related to the determination of whether an applicant qualifies for international protection and the rights associated with that status, issues related to vulnerable persons, including children, victims of torture, victims of human trafficking, gender sensitive issues, interview techniques, issues related to the production and use of information on third countries and reception conditions. The most recent Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2021/2303) expands the training requirements to include issues related to interpretation and cultural mediation, relocation procedures and resettlement, issues related to fingerprints and data protection, data quality and security requirements, best interest of the child assessment and age assessment techniques. The legal requirement for training delivery represents a broad curriculum of specific learning that is not available in formal educational settings.

The structure that supports development and delivery of training is based on collaboration between the Agency, relevant Member State organisations and other agencies and stakeholders. The EUAA coordinates curriculum design and development activities through working groups comprising Agency staff and experts from across Member States. The EUAA delivers train-the-trainer courses to build the capacity of trainers from Member State organisations to deliver the asylum curriculum to their staff. This is a resource efficient system to produce high-quality learning materials by pooling EU expertise that meets legal obligations and fosters convergence in practice. The EUAA also delivers training directly to staff deployed as part of the operational support provided to Member States under disproportionate pressure. Training activities are guided by a training and learning strategy, implemented by the structures within the Agency and approved by a Management Board that comprises representatives from Member States, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the European Commission (EC).

Asylum and reception is a specific sector within the broader field of migration and consequently the EUAA Regulation obliges the EUAA to coordinate activities that enable interoperability with EU systems for borders, migration, security and justice, particularly in crisis situations. This necessitates coordination with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European





Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the European Law Enforcement Agency (EUROPOL), the European Agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems in the area of freedom, security and justice (eu-LISA) and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

It is clear that learning in the asylum and reception sector is entrenched in a raft of law and policy instruments at EU, national and institutional levels that directly impact the pedagogy. In order to implement these policies, the training system operates across the sector involving a broad range of stakeholders. However, these policy instruments operate in isolation from the policy instruments that impact the higher, vocational, and professional education and training systems in the EU.

In 2015, the EUAA made provision to pursue validation of the asylum curriculum and set up a working group of Member State representatives to support the transition from learning objectives to learning outcomes with assessments, explore alignment to the EQF and implement a pilot programme where modules were validated by an external university at EQF level 5. The evaluation of the pilot was deemed successful and in particular identified that learners appreciated the certification of the learning. Consequently, a working group comprised of representatives from Member States and the EUAA's Training and Professional Development Centre was established, known as the Certification and Accreditation Working Group (CAWG), which began to explore a full system of accreditation of the curriculum.

An integral part of the preparation for accreditation conducted by the working group in liaison with Member State organisations, was the mapping of all of the duties and tasks relevant to the implementation of the Common European Asylum System. The mapping exercise resulted in the formulation of a sectoral qualifications framework that details the Occupational Standards formulated from the knowledge and skills required to carry out job tasks and then progressively levelled in complexity (EASO, 2021) and then corresponding Educational Standards formulated as learning outcomes, informally aligned to the EQF. Mirroring the nomenclature of regional and national qualifications frameworks, the EUAA adopted the title 'European Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Asylum and Reception Officials' or ESQF. The ESQF is presented as a matrix with knowledge, skills and responsibility/autonomy learning outcomes defined for levels 4/5, 6 and 7 to reflect the learning required to achieve the associated Occupational Standard. The learning outcomes are organised into three competence areas of: (i) asylum and reception generic competences; (ii) asylum and reception specific competences and (iii) supervisory and management competences.

The competency framework element of the ESQF package is organised according to complexity rather than clustered around occupational roles. This serves two purposes; firstly, there are no agreed job titles, roles, or common hierarchies in the asylum and reception sector. In a small organisation, an official may have many diverse responsibilities, whereas in a large organisation, there is a greater chance of a narrower set of responsibilities. Secondly, organising competences by complexity enables a link between the competence and the learning outcome. So, if a staff member needs to be able to 'do X job task', then they need to learn, or be able to demonstrate that they have learned 'X learning outcome'. On completion of the ESQF, all Member States were invited to review and comment on the framework in terms of inclusivity, gaps, and levels of complexity, prior to final approval.





Research aims

The ESQF was developed with the clear goal of establishing formal recognition of the European Asylum Curriculum through accreditation; specifically supporting the Agency training cycle of identification of training needs, training design, delivery, and evaluation to facilitate convergence in professional practice through training as required by the EUAA Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2021/2303). Whilst it is premature to evaluate the full impact of the ESQF, it is important to capture the early effects of implementation that could serve to further support the utilisation whilst guiding future evaluation and contributing to the literature in terms of sharing practice.

The research set out to assess:

1. How the ESQF has influenced the European Asylum Curriculum.
2. The benefits and challenges of the ESQF for the EUAA and EU+ countries.
3. The generalisability of the approach taken in the wider EU+ countries and in the wider Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) domain.

These three research aims broadly cover pedagogy, institution, and wider policy.





Methodology

As the ESQF is in the early stages of utilisation, the pool of potential participants with practical experience in using the ESQF is limited. A qualitative methodology was adopted based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews, to enable nuanced data analysis, followed up with a focus group discussion to address the research questions.

The type of analysis selected was guided by the degree of interpretation expected to be applied to the data. The research questions are focused on the use, potential and generalisability of the ESQF. As the phenomena under investigation are tangible, thematic content analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was selected as less interpretation is required in the analysis process and it was expected that data will produce both highly tangible and more nuanced but still tangible results.

In the current research there are *a priori* assumptions in relation to training design, the training cycle and the EUAA's role that provide an overarching deductive framework for the research and the analysis. Given this deductive approach, the present study emphasises the investigation of the qualification and contextualisation in the data rather than the quantification of the data without neglecting high occurrences of themes. The data analysis blended semantic and latent approaches as specific participant groups such as EUAA staff, or some elements of the ESQF have their own vocabulary which favours a semantic approach, but a latent interpretation may be more useful particularly where the data are not collected in participants' native language.

Participants

18 participants with experience in the use of the ESQF participated in the initial interviews. Participants were asked to respond to the questions from their individual professional opinion, rather than official organisational perspective, thus the type rather than specific organisations are identified to protect confidentiality (see table 1 below).

The focus group was conducted with 13 representatives of eight EU+ administrations with responsibility for asylum and reception. These participants were members of the Certification and Accreditation Working Group (CAWG) who developed the ESQF and were most familiar with the opportunities and challenges of implementation from a national perspective given their liaison role. One participant provided both an in-depth interview and participated in the focus group.



Table 1. Organisational background of participants

Professional context	Participants
Focus Group comprised of EU+ representatives (members of the CAWG working group)	13
EUAA	10
Higher Education Institutions	2
Member State representatives (individual)	2
Other EU Agencies (2)	3
International organisations	1

Ethical considerations

An ethics and risk analysis was conducted and approved in accordance with EUAA protocols. All participants interviewed were fully informed of the research aims and intention to publish, and their rights to withdraw any part or all of their transcript up until the analysis of data. Participants were asked to provide their personal, profession opinion and were not speaking on behalf of their organisations. As such, all participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses. In order to maintain confidentiality, the interviews were scheduled, conducted and analysed by the lead researcher, who is external to the EUAA.

Interviews and Focus Group

All interviews commenced with a briefing in which participants were reminded of the research aims, their right to withdraw and confidentiality arrangements. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked, debriefed and offered a copy of their transcript to review. Interviews ranged between 20-73 minutes in duration, with an average of 51 minutes. Participants were asked broad open questions in relation to their role and responsibilities, experience in using the ESQF, potential for using the ESQF in other aspects of their role, the ESQF's influence on the asylum curriculum and potential role within the JHA domain, as well as challenges and benefits of the ESQF. Participants were also given the opportunity to raise any ESQF-related issues that they wished to discuss.

The focus group of representatives of Member State administrations was conducted during an in-person meeting of the CAWG working group, with one person joining on-line. The group was presented with the analysis of initial interviews as a basis for the discussion, guided by the three research questions viewed from the Member State perspective. In agreement with the participants, the discussion was not recorded, but detailed contemporaneous notes were taken.



Results

Thematic content analysis was conducted following the steps of Braun and Clark (2006). After the completion of the interviews, the electronically generated transcripts of the online interviews were corrected by reviewing them with the video recording. This process provided the initial, thorough familiarisation with the data.

Repeated reading of transcripts to conduct both deductive coding of the initial responses to questions and inductive coding of conversational elements of the interview produced 143 codes. These codes were further refined, concatenated and augmented with comments from the in-person focus group held at the CAWG meeting, which resulted in 54 codes. The derived codes were linked to both explicit and latent data. These codes were organised into 4 themes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding of conversational elements of interviews

Pedagogy	Institution (EUAA)
Learner pathways	Asylum team profiles
Training needs analysis tool	Staff roles and responsibilities
Training aligned to job tasks	Lots of work
Learning outcomes	Common standards for HR and training
Scope of modules	Steep learning curve
Structure of modules	Additional expertise necessary
Rapid needs assessment	Working in silos
Structure of asylum curriculum	Strategy for training process
Focused delivery	Planning tool
Educational vs operational environment differences	
Gaps in asylum curriculum	Policy
Vision of future curriculum	Basis to explore regional cooperation in training
Module learning and assessment strategies	Basis to explore cooperation /collaboration across the JHA for common ground
Needs oriented module design	Improve coordination in EU response to MS
Asylum curriculum more vocational	Improve coordination EU and international response to third countries
Module design process	Staff under pressure in MS and third countries
Cohesion of experts in design process	Variation in MS administration structures/roles
Dynamic field	Cooperation between asylum and reception
Reflects MS consultation / agreement	EU-Centric





Pedagogy	Policy
Not a panacea for writing learning outcomes	Harmonised approach to working procedures in deployments
Delivery and assessment of skills/competence	Client benefit of interagency cooperation
Alignment to levels	Fear of overriding current national systems
Value/challenge of combining operational and educational expertise	Mobility within and across related sectors
Paradigm shift to LOs	Need for accreditation, qualified experts
Diversity of learners	Common language between agencies
	Desire for accreditation/fear of accreditation paradox
Common Challenges	
Common language, different interpretation	
Academic language difficult for operational staff	
Quality Assurance and ESQF review	
Complexity	
Guidance and training on how to implement	

Pedagogy: what is delivered to learners

Without exception, all the participants familiar with the European Asylum Curriculum expressed the view that that the ESQF was influencing the curriculum in a positive manner. This positivity was expressed in terms of curriculum structure, harmonisation, standardisation, learner pathways, more vocational rather than theoretically oriented, better module design, stakeholder agreement, improved justification for modules and future scope of the curriculum.

The implementation of the ESQF triggered a major review of the European Asylum Curriculum, which, in the context of new training demands, the Covid-19 pandemic and increased pressure on asylum and reception due to conflicts, is a significant workload. The work to align existing training catalogue to the ESQF is not a simple exercise of levelling or referencing of learning outcomes. The review process involved ensuring consistency and continuity of learning across modules, avoiding gaps and repetition, with the restructuring of learning common to a number of job tasks from learning related to specific job tasks. Thus, modules have become shorter and more focused, such that they can be flexibly combined to suit individual learner needs, without any repetition.

That the intentions behind the development of the ESQF are reflected in this level of positive constructive appraisal is encouraging for such an early stage in the implementation and participants were equally positive about the future potential. In mapping the whole asylum and reception learning field, the framework has significantly expanded potential to meet training needs beyond the initial curriculum focus of the asylum case worker and in particular addressing learning needs at the higher levels of the ESQF. Participants noted that the broadening of the curriculum will impact the type of expertise necessary for development and delivery. However,





such expansion was seen as being justified in the context of the positive impact that the more focused curriculum has had since its initial introduction.

The vast majority of participants in the sample described the usefulness of the ESQF in supporting various elements of the training cycle, specifically in training needs analysis, training design and development, training delivery, and review. The structure and identification of Occupational with corresponding Educational Standards in the ESQF is entirely congruous with the process of identification of training needs and ensuring that the training offered meets the need. The EUAA utilises two different approaches to training needs analysis, using a full training needs analysis methodology across the Member States for the purposes of planning and the EUAA Joint Rapid Needs Assessment in locations facing migratory pressure in an operational context. It is in the latter type of situation that the ESQF has been most used in the early implementation.

Establishing the training needs of asylum and reception officials is a complex task as each country has differing organisational structures. Moreover, there are no common job titles that carry a specific set of responsibilities. As such, two asylum officials with the same title from different Member States could have vastly different knowledge, skills and responsibilities. The use of Occupational Standards in the ESQF overcomes the issue of nomenclature. However, a number of the participants pointed out that direct use of the ESQF in operational contexts was difficult due to the academic language of the framework compared to the operational orientation of the subjects involved in the needs analysis and the time pressure associated with the task. Thus, it is the EUAA staff's understanding of the framework and the sub-level duties and tasks of the Occupational Standards, that supports its utility, particularly in Rapid Needs Assessments. One participant described the ESQF as the "backbone of the process".

Participants noted that it is the direct relationship between the ESQF and the European Asylum Curriculum that is most advantageous for a rapid response. If the needs assessment identifies training needs that are included in the ESQF, but are not yet covered in the asylum curriculum, then an urgent training design process is necessary. In the context of operations, with multiple agencies providing responses, it is essential to be able to respond rapidly and to know the specific parameters of the agency's responsibility.

The ESQF was viewed as a very useful tool in terms of establishing training needs and gaps, however an understanding of the duties and tasks related to each Occupational Standard is critical to the process. There was broad agreement amongst participants that the ESQF is a complex framework, "particularly for the uninitiated". Whilst it does offer the opportunity for flexible learning paths, it would be unrealistic to expect learners to navigate the ESQF to identify a personal learning path, or for managers in a rapid needs assessment to identify skills gaps. Participants would welcome tools to potentially overcome the complexity of the ESQF, whilst making its benefits and opportunities accessible. Participants expressed an expectation that those involved in training design would use the framework tables extensively, but that Member States would predominantly use such tools for training needs.

The ESQF was considered very useful to support the design of training due its learning outcome focus. The design of new EUAA training is managed by a focal point who acts to coordinate the design and development process with a working group. Participants identified that most of



those involved in the development of training are experts in the field but with different backgrounds, languages, legal and academic traditions, points of view, interests and experience and that coordinating the work of the group can be challenging. Nevertheless, input from such a diverse working group adds exceptional value to the quality of the training.

The framework was described as a “tool for negotiation” between experts to reach a common goal. Participants also appreciated the focus created by using the ESQF notwithstanding the challenge of change. The decision to develop the ESQF, driven by the goal of pursuing accreditation, has created a significant shift from a content orientation in the development of training to a learning outcome-oriented approach embracing quality assurance guidelines. Such a change in approach was reported as being valid but difficult, not only for EUAA staff, but also for the significant range of external experts involved in the training development process. It was pointed out that experts with significant operational experience, who are comfortable in developing training content, must now consider valid robust assessments and ensure that content fully meets the learning outcomes, as opposed to an aim or objective.

Participants noted that the EUAA is employing more people from education backgrounds which was viewed as positive and welcomed, although it was noted that effort is still necessary to enhance the interaction of those with content/operational expertise and those with learning design and QA expertise, which perhaps could be expected. Equally, there is an ongoing need to familiarise all external participants in the design and development process in order to capitalise on the value of the ESQF. One participant summarised this value as: “I think it provides better structure. I think it provides guidance in actually building a proper learning strategy and having very precisely defined, measurable learning outcomes that enable the trainer to monitor learner progress toward achieving them.”

It was expected that there would be minimal if any reference to training delivery by participants, given the early stage of the reform process in line with previous research (Cedefop 2016). However, participants did comment on how the ESQF affected their approach to training delivery, predominantly as in training design, focusing on the link between the learning outcome and the job task the learner will be expected to do at the end of the training. One participant did describe looking at the ESQF before training delivery, to locate the module in the ‘big picture’, which is a useful strategy to avoid covering material from other modules.

This change in approach to delivery epitomises and justifies the paradigm shift to learning outcome-oriented professional learning. However, it remains unclear if this response will be sustained over time and create a shift in delivery culture. Whilst it is too early in the reform process to gather direct feedback from learners, the learner perspective should be at the centre of EUAA quality measures including the ESQF. Participants commented on the potential benefits for learners in the actions under implementation, including flexible learning paths, tools for matching duties and tasks with training modules, mobility of learners and the credibility of the training. A participant called the ESQF “an instrument for building strategy for learning paths”, whilst another commented that learners would be able to build modular learning paths that cover all of the diversity of the sector.



Institution: Impact within the EUAA

The implementation of the ESQF in combination with the intention to seek accreditation, has had a significant effect on the structure, staff profiles and processes within the EUAA. Participants pointed to how the recruitment of staff with programme design and quality assurance profiles has led to new internal processes for the management of the curricula, and moreover, existing staff reflected on the steep learning curve to accommodate new design processes, including the design of robust assessments.

Participants identified the challenge of developing modules to achieve the applied skill, responsibility and autonomy learning outcomes within the scope of short modules and traditional assessments. The issue did not lie with staff ability to design such learning and assessment, but in the resources to deliver and assess such modules, which are incompatible with short modules with a blend of online and in-person delivery, particularly at higher levels of the ESQF. Participants pointed out that a decision needed to be taken to either adapt the learning to match the resources, or to adapt the resources to reflect the required learning as defined in the ESQF which was considered to be the ideal scenario. The outcome to introduce work-based learning modules reflects this debate.

The early utilisation of the ESQF impacts the EUAA beyond the department responsible for training. Participants pointed out that the framework was used as the basis for defining over 70 job profiles for use in recruitment of staff for operational deployment. The profiles are variously defined at junior, intermediate and senior levels, with the Occupational and Educational Standards used to define both the profile of indicative tasks, which informed a levelling process to define the profile requirements in terms of qualifications and experience.

Policy: interaction with Member States and institutions

In the broader policy area, participants discussed the impact of the ESQF in the Member States, other JHA agencies, as well as mobility and utility beyond the EU's borders. Member State participants highlighted the challenges of recruitment and retention of staff in times of organisational pressure, noting in particular that high staff turnover resulting in a constant recruitment and training cycle adds additional pressure. The absence of available formal qualifications means that administrations must train newly recruited staff before they commence in their roles, which takes a substantial period of time. In this context, the ESQF and the subsequent restructuring of the asylum curriculum into shorter, more specific modules was welcomed.

In the context of early implementation, some participants expressed difficulty in explaining the ESQF and the concepts relating to accreditation to managers, in particular explaining the full implications and potential challenges. There was a call for clarity in the relationship between EUAA tools and improved coordination to avoid repetition of work in the EUAA and in Member State administrations. In this context, participants requested more information and targeted training on the EQSF and how it can be used in national contexts. This said, participants identified that some Member States have begun utilising the ESQF to identify and map training



needs, design specific learning paths, identify learning gaps that are affecting performance so that they can be addressed and as a supervisory tool to follow up on the progress of competency development.

In relation to cooperation with other EU agencies, the analysis identified a shared perception of political and agency willingness to cooperate in areas of mutual interest. Participants pointed out that there are some specific topics of potential overlap at the lower levels of the ESQF, particularly as they pertain to operations in Member States under disproportionate pressure or crisis situations. A participant also explained that in such situations, while each agency has a very specific remit, there are commonalities in the management and supervision tasks that require the same skills, regardless of sector. It was suggested that in situations of a multi-agency approach to EU situations, qualifications frameworks could be a useful instrument for establishing areas of coordination, collaboration and interoperability. They can act as a solid basis for high-level discussions to enhance a harmonised approach to procedures in needs analysis, training design and delivery that should lead to more efficient working practices. Currently, two agencies in the Justice and Home Affairs area have developed sectoral qualifications frameworks (the EUAA and Frontex), whilst others exist in the fields of security and the environment. It was noted that there is a tendency for agencies to work bilaterally in the development of different sector-level frameworks and that there is scope for a common forum for mutual benefit.

The EUAA, like many EU agencies, also cooperates with third countries and international organisations. Participants discussing this international dimension suggested that the beneficiary countries of EU or international responses in the areas of migration have the same conceptual needs in terms of training and operate under similar conditions of disproportionate pressure at their borders, with the associated human resource challenges. It was considered that the ESQF is unapologetically Eurocentric, which means that, while it may not be an exact fit for third countries, it was nonetheless useful. This utility was expressed in terms of establishing learning pathways, needs analysis and the potential for establishing quality. It was also suggested that the ESQF could be a very useful instrument for the coordination of training interventions offered by different international organisations.

The final perspective on policy discussed by participants reflects education rather than migration policy. It was pointed out there is significant mobility of workers between and across agencies and Member State organisations in the broader field. Indeed, in the context of human resources challenges, there was a call to facilitate further mobility through training within the sector and between associated sectors. Sectoral frameworks, or a common language of learning and competences were seen as a tool to further facilitate this mobility, which ultimately, from a European perspective, enables optimum use of a pool of resources.

Challenges

Two major challenges relating to the implementation of the ESQF emerged from the analysis around the interrelated concepts of quality assurance and understanding. Whilst all of the findings in this research pertain in some part to quality, over half of the interviewed participants



directly raised the issue of the quality of the ESQF in terms of periodic review and perceived or actual gaps.

While some participants drew attention to gaps of learning in the ESQF, in-depth discussion identified that the perceived gaps were actually covered but at lower levels of specificity than the qualification level in the framework. These discussions do not preclude the possibility that there are indeed some gaps or that gaps will emerge in the future. As one participant pointed out, the usefulness of the ESQF is wholly dependent on the framework reflecting the learning across the whole sector. There were a range of perceptions surrounding the periodic review of the ESQF which ranged from a fear that the ESQF will not be reviewed to a perception that it will be updated too frequently or on an ad-hoc basis.

Another challenge mentioned is the complexity of the ESQF. Most participants mentioned complexity and drew attention to the necessity for training, information, or support around issues related to the implementation of the ESQF. These issues included the specific meaning of the language used; how to use it in training design, and how to establish learning paths. Participants from a range of backgrounds and responsibilities wanted specific training from their perspective, perhaps reflecting the challenge of realising the potential opportunities of the ESQF.



Discussion

This exploratory study has identified that the learning outcomes of a sectoral qualifications framework may usefully be considered from the perspectives of pedagogy, institution, and broader policy, recognising that these perspectives interact, and that this utility could serve to support the implementation and enable further research (Ure, 2019). At a pedagogical level, whilst the ESQF was largely constructed by a working group reflecting the representatives of Member States and thus implemented in a top-down manner as a tool related to accreditation and work-based demands, there were no indications of resistance to its application, from those involved in training design and delivery in contrast to research (Allais, 2011; Prøitz, 2010; Bleiklie et al 2017). The specificity of the learning outcomes was welcome in assisting the design and delivery process, focusing rather than restricting the autonomy of the practitioners, with the relationship between the learning outcome and the occupational competency or job task that informs the content of the learning rather than the content informing the interpretation of the learning outcome.

Cedefop (2016) found that the shift to a learning outcome approach impacts curriculum and programme design, but that paradoxically, the impact on teaching and learning is limited. By contrast, this research found that the reform of the curriculum using a learning outcome approach was having an impact on teaching and on the choice of learning activities. This impact may be due to the operational background of EUAA trainers and content experts who align the learning outcomes to corresponding occupational standards acts to inspire both design and delivery.

The most significant pedagogical benefit from the early utilisation of the ESQF emerged as the strategic instrument for the development of flexible learning paths. The European Commission introduced the concept of flexible educational pathways to support mobility, encourage flexible regimes for study and enable broad recognition (EC, 2015; UNESCO 2016). Critically, it has been reported that flexible pathways better suit the needs of both employers and learners as they improve job performance and contribute to a sense of fulfilment for learners (Carlsen et al, 2016). Flexible pathways, particularly in combination with shorter modules and work-based learning, support newer concepts such as micro credentials (Shapiro Futures et al, 2020; Sankey, 2021; Stoerger, 2021) on condition that they are subject to robust assessment and quality assurance. Thus, the ESQF as an instrument, bridges pedagogy and two dimensions of policy; educational policy and policy related to the sector of asylum and reception, where the former should enhance the latter. It is at institutional level that these policy dimensions are reconciled.

From the EUAA perspective, the ESQF acts as an instrument of policy cohesion. It influences processes to establish training needs, training design, delivery and training quality processes. One key finding was that the utilisation of the ESQF was regarded by staff and stakeholders as worthwhile despite the considerable amount of work involved. One point of interest is that the introduction of learning outcomes in isolation did not have a profound impact on delivery. However, it appears that using the ESQF to restructure the curriculum did trigger the deep implementation of learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016).



In line with the expectations of Ure (2019), this reform process has resulted in broadening the range of job profiles of staff employed in the agency to reflect curriculum design and quality assurance expertise. This is the same effect but in the reverse direction as reported by Spöttl and Windelband (2013), who found that reforming vocational education leads to a necessity to address staff competences to be able to understand how learning can be applied in the workplace.

A key issue to emerge from the analysis is the delivery and assessment of learning relating to applied professional practice. Moving from a more theoretically oriented curriculum without assessment, to a formal, broad vocational curriculum with robust quality assured assessment is challenging, particularly where the ESQF spans levels 4 to 7 of the EQF and is completely oriented to professional learning. In terms of delivery, the learning outcomes lend themselves to the use of work-based learning which has surged in the vocational sector in recent years (Cedefop 2022a). Reliable and valid assessment are more problematic but possible, particularly for complex cognitive learning with methods such as e-portfolios (Clarke and Boud 2018). However, there are other critical performance-based skills, for example interviewing and soft skills, that are more challenging to assess (Cedefop 2016).

Another area of discussion was the potential issue of gaps in coverage which have two potential reasons. The first being that there is an actual area of learning that is missing or secondly that the person reporting the issue does not fully understand how the ESQF was constructed or how to use it. Either reason affects the quality or the perception of quality of the instrument and should be addressed through capacity building and quality assurance measures. Having initiated and coordinated the development of the ESQF, the agency is responsible for supporting its utilisation and ensuring that it remains relevant to the sector.

The analysis identified that the utility of the ESQF stretches beyond referencing, and participants had varied requests for information and training, tailored to their specific use. The analysis here may assist in targeting specific audiences and the level of pedagogy, institution, and broader policy in guiding such targeted information. Given that the ESQF has the potential to promote harmonisation and cohesion across functions, ensuring that staff understand how to apply it has major advantages.

There are no formal guidelines or examples of good practice available for the periodic review and update of a qualifications frameworks at sectoral level. Auzinger et al (2016) found that a variety of methods, ranging from highly structured to ad hoc arrangements and involving either a broad or limited range of experts, stakeholders or management can be used to conduct or approve updates.

As mentioned above, the ESQF provides an instrumental bridge between pedagogy and two strands of policy: sector policy as defined by the Common European Asylum System along with education policy, moderated by institutional policy in the EUAA and Member State administrations. A significant outcome of this research is the potential of a qualifications framework to support the cooperation with other Member State administrations and identify synergies with other EU agencies.





Conclusion

The ESQF has been shown to offer potential as an instrument of pedagogical and organisational reform of training. The direct link between the job tasks and learning outcomes is critical to the usefulness of the ESQF. Using it to ensure that assessments are authentic to the field builds confidence that the learner will be able to fulfil their tasks as defined and agreed with all stakeholders and required for the legal and strategic goals of the organisation. It is encouraging that the ESQF is not just perceived as a referencing tool for levelling, transparency, and mobility purposes but also as a driver for enhancing occupational competence by ensuring that training is fit-for-purpose and meets learner needs.

In addition, the framework also presents opportunities to harness synergies within and between sectors, providing a common language to enable consistency and coherence across different organisational functions and establishing a basis for cooperation in training and learning with related sectors. However, the value of these potential benefits is dependent upon the sustained quality of the framework. Although limited in scope, this early evaluation of the utilisation of the ESQF is reassuring in that it demonstrates the utility of such frameworks for the development of training in the context of asylum and reception.





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