REFERENCING OF THE ESTONIAN QUALIFICATIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK TO THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Executive Summary

Creation of the Estonian Qualifications Framework (EstQF) started in 2005, when the minister of education and research established a broad-based working group with an assignment to analyse the first draft proposal of the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), the possibilities to link the Estonian five-levels occupational qualifications framework to the EQF, and formulate suggestions about the development of the EstQF. The working group put forward the proposal of creating an eight-levels comprehensive national qualifications framework. The proposal was supported by the employers' and employees' organisations, by the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. Based on this agreement, another broad-based working group was established by the minister of education and research with the task to draft a new Occupational Qualifications Act, which would include also the EstQF.

An eight-level qualifications framework was established in 2008, with the Occupational Qualifications Act (http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus). The level descriptors of the EstQF are identical to the level descriptors of the EQF. The EstQF is a comprehensive qualifications framework, which includes qualifications awarded by the education and training institutions (general education qualifications, vocational education and training (VET) qualifications, and higher education qualifications), and occupational qualifications awarded by state recognised awarding institutions (professional associations etc.). Occupational qualification means a qualification associated with a trade, occupation or profession. Occupational qualifications can be gained through work based learning, in-service training, and adult education. Some occupational qualifications can be gained also through formal education system.
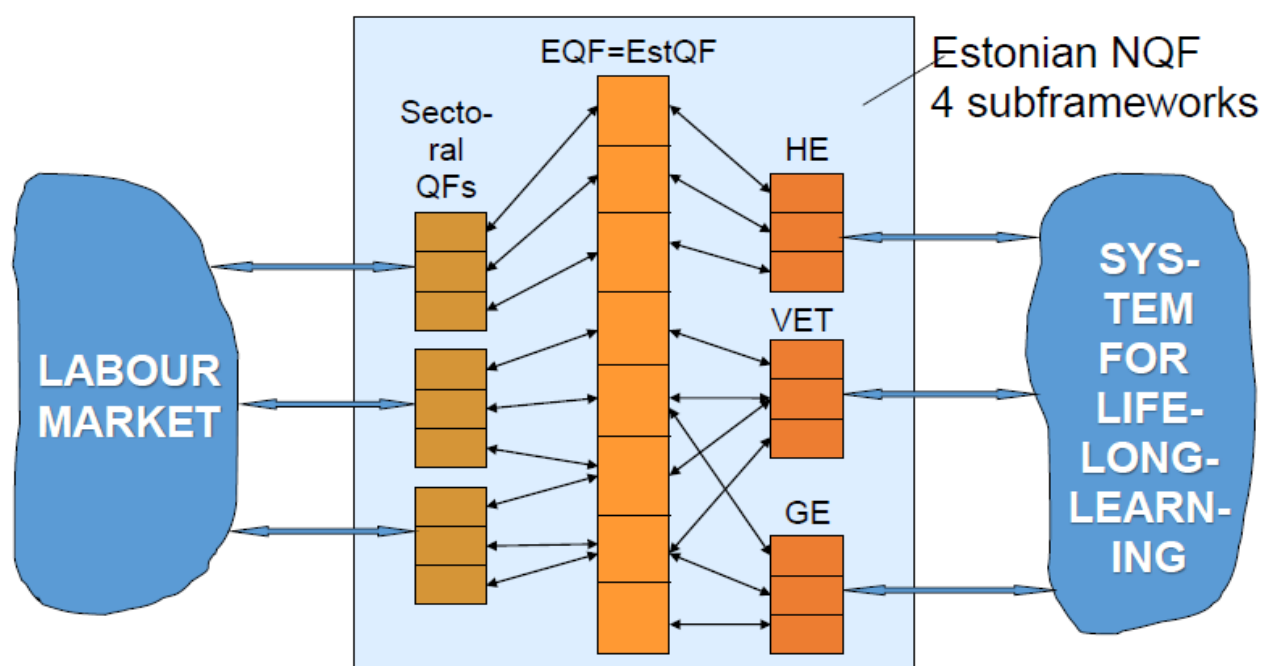
The creation and implementation of the EstQF is based on the principles for accountability and quality assurance of qualifications laid down by the European Parliament and Council recommendation on establishment of the EQF (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007- 0463+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN).

Initially referencing of the EstQF to the EQF took place from January 2010 to August 2011. This document is an amended version of the referencing report presented to the EQF Advisory Group in September 2011 and placed into the EQF portal in July 2012. Major reason for revision of the report was adoption of the new VET Institutions Act and new Standard of VET in June 2013. This has led to VET qualifications reform reflected in this report. The report also describes other minor changes in the EstQF.

The EstQF consists of four sub-frameworks: for general education qualifications, for VET qualifications, for higher education qualifications and for occupational qualifications (see Figure 1). The referencing report is built around these four sub-frameworks. The sub-framework is described in terms of the legal framework, learning outcomes (LOs) of the qualifications involved, analysis of their compatibility with the EstQF level descriptions, recognition of prior learning (RPL), awarding of qualifications, and their

quality assurance.

The steering committee established by the minister of education and research arrived at the conclusion that the referencing of four sub-frameworks of qualifications to the EstQF and referencing it to the EQF follows all the rules, procedures and quality criteria that have been agreed upon in the European Union (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007- 0463+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN). Table 1 presents the results of assigning the EstQF levels to Estonian formal education qualifications, and examples of occupational qualifications on different levels. The state register of occupational qualifications includes 545 occupational qualifications (http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutseregister. Examples of occupational qualification standards in English can be found on the Estonian Qualifications Authority's (EQA) web page: http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/tutvustus/kutsestandardid_eng.

HE – higher education qualifications sub-framework
VET – VET qualifications sub-framework
GE – general education qualifications sub-framework
Sectoral qualifications frameworks comprise the occupational qualifications framework

Figure 1. Structure of the EstQF

This document serves also as a Bologna self-certification report. The working group established by the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER) arrived at the conclusion that the Estonian Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EstQF-HE) is compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) and fulfils all the Bologna self-certification criteria and procedures http://www.ehea.info/. References to the respective Bologna self-certification criteria and procedures are given in the body text of the report.

Table 1. Placement of formal education qualifications and occupational qualifications in the EstQF

Formal education qualifications	EstQF levels	Examples of occupational qualifications
Basic education certificate based on curriculum for students with moderate and severe learning disabilities	1	
Basic education certificate based on simplified	2	Assistant gardener, Logger

curriculum Basic education certificate VET qualification certificate, level 2		
VET qualification certificate, level 3	3	Electronic equipment assembler, Woodworking bench operator
Upper secondary general education certificate Upper secondary VET certificate VET qualification certificate, level 4	4	Harvester operator, Veterinary assistant
VET qualification certificate, level 5	5	Biogas plant operator, Mechatronic-technician
Diploma of Bachelor's degree, Diploma of professional higher education	6	Physiotherapist, Civil Engineer, Applied Architect
Diploma of Master's degree	7	Diploma engineer, Diploma architect
Diploma of Doctoral degree	8	Chartered civil engineer, Chartered architect

Since the level descriptions of the EstQF are identical with those of the EQF, the quality of referencing the qualifications from the four sub-frameworks to the EstQF is critical. Therefore, the criteria for referencing the EstQF to the EQF are defined in terms of the placement of qualifications to the EstQF:

1) *The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Points (NCP), are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.*

   The Estonian Qualifications Authority (EstQA) was nominated as the NCP for the EQF implementation in Estonia with the 26.02.2010 decision of the MoER. This information is presented on the EstQA website www.kutsekoda.ee. In order to ensure the involvement of all key stakeholders in these processes, a broad-based steering committee was established with the 4.10.2010 order of the minister of education and research. The steering committee includes representatives of competent national bodies and stakeholders: the MoER, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the State Chancellery, Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, EstQA, Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions, Public Servants Trade Unions Central Organization TALO, Estonian Association of Student Unions, Estonian Association of Pupils' Unions, Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre. Initially, a separate working group was established to prepare the Bologna self-certification report. With the 9.08.2011 order of the minister of education and research the steering committee for the EQF referencing was amended to include additional representatives of the higher education sector.

2) *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualification level descriptions and the level descriptors of the EstQF.*

   According to the Occupational Qualifications Act, the EstQF has 8 levels, the 1st of which is the lowest and the 8th is the highest. The descriptions of the EstQF qualification levels are identical to the EQF level descriptions. The sub-frameworks for general education qualifications, VET qualifications, higher education qualifications, and occupational qualifications contain more detailed and specific descriptors and rules for designing and awarding qualifications. The EstQF levels are assigned to general education qualifications (on levels 1,2 and 4), VET qualifications (on levels 2-5), higher education qualifications (on levels 6-8), and occupational qualifications (on levels 2-8) (see Figure 2). Learning outcomes (LOs) based descriptions of these types of qualifications have been compared with level descriptions of the EstQF and the best fit found.

3) *The qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.*

The qualifications of general education, VET, and higher education are described in terms of LOs. For all the aforementioned qualification types, the principles of recognition of non-formal and informal learning are defined in the relevant regulations of the Government of the Republic (National Curriculum for Basic Schools, Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools, National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools, Standard of VET, and Standard of Higher Education). On the basis of these principles the awarding institutions shall establish the procedures for RPL. In higher education, a credit point system, which conforms to the ECTS, is used. In the VET sector a credit point system that conforms to the ECVET, is used.
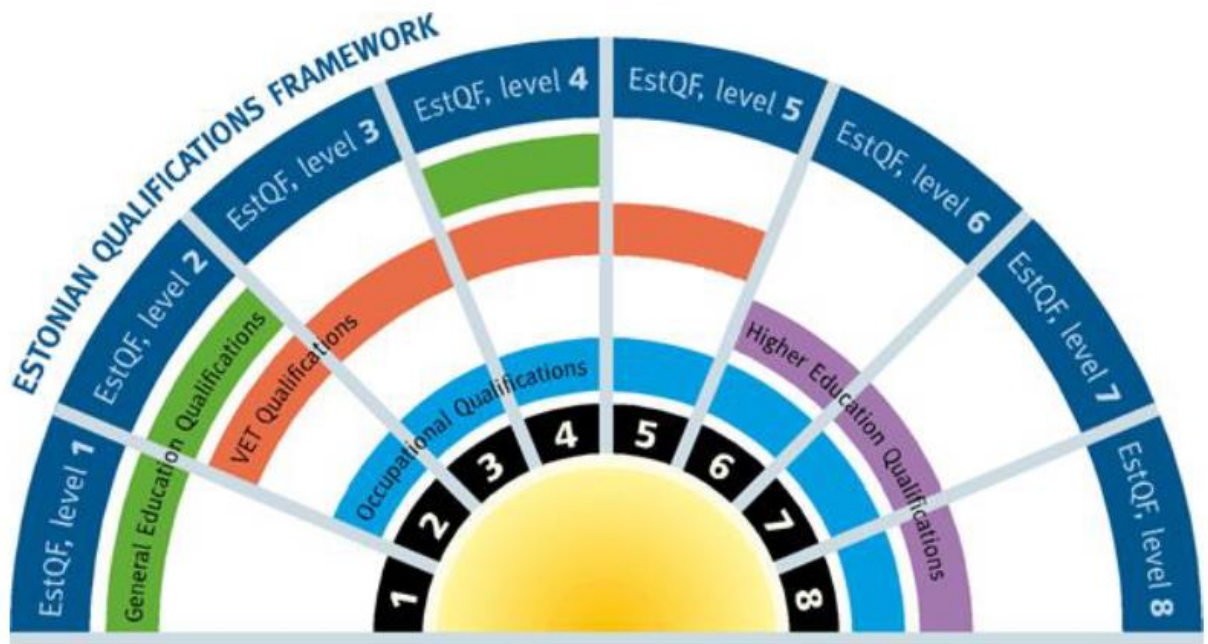

Figure 2. Placement of qualifications in the EstQF

4) *The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the EstQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the EstQF are transparent.*

Referencing general education, VET and higher education qualifications to the EstQF levels has been laid down in the relevant regulations of the Government of the Republic (National Curriculum for Basic Schools, Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools, National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools, Standard of VET, and Standard of Higher Education). Representatives of stakeholders were involved in developing all of the aforementioned regulations. The EstQF levels of occupational qualifications are determined in the process of developing the corresponding occupational qualification standards and laid down by a corresponding decision of the sector skills council (SSC).

The EstQF shall include qualifications that meet the following criteria: they are defined in a LOs based qualification standard (curriculum or occupational qualification standard), meeting the requirements of the national framework standard(s) (if applicable); they are awarded by a state recognised institution (educational institution or an institution awarding occupational qualifications (IAOQ)).

5) *The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the EstQF and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (see Clause 2.2).*

In the general education system, a quality assurance system stipulated by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act has been implemented. In general education schools as awarders of

qualification, self-assessment systems are created, the effectiveness of which is regularly assessed. External evaluation of general education qualifications includes state examinations in the end of upper secondary school.

In the VET system, a quality assurance system stipulated by the VET Institutions Act has been implemented. Since September 2013 a new quality assurance system for VET qualifications, following the principles of European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET is implemented. In the new system the duties of a quality agency are carried out by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) (http://ekka.archimedes.ee/en/) .

In the higher education system, a comprehensive quality assurance system that follows the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) has been implemented based on the Universities Act and the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act. The duties of a quality agency are carried out by the EKKA. The responsibilities of the EKKA and the main principles of external quality assurance are in full accordance with the ESG. The EKKA has been included into the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in October 2013.

In higher education institutions as awarders of qualifications, comprehensive quality assurance systems have been created. The effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems is assessed regularly in the process of institutional accreditation that was piloted in 2011 and is fully functioning since 2012.

The principles and procedures for ensuring the quality in the occupational qualifications system have been laid down by the Occupational Qualifications Act, which follows the requirements of ISO 17924 (General requirements for certification of persons). Quality assurance in the occupational qualifications system involves: quality assurance of granting an institution awarding occupational qualification (IAOQ) the right to award occupational qualifications, quality assurance of occupational qualification standards, assessment of the quality of assessing the competence of applicants by the IAOQ, and regular external evaluation of IAOQ.

6) *The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.*

In the case of general education qualifications, the quality assurance institution is the MoER. The reference of general education qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in the National Curriculum for Basic Schools, Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools and the National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools.

In the case of VET qualifications, the quality assurance institution is the EKKA. The reference of VET qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in the Standard of VET.

In the case of higher education qualifications, the quality assurance institution is the EKKA. The reference of higher education qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in the Standard of Higher Education.

In the case of occupational qualifications, the quality assurance institution is the EstQA. The reference of specific occupational qualifications to the EstQF is decided by the Sector Skills Council (SSC) of the relevant field of occupational activity. According to the Occupational Qualifications Act, the EstQA monitors the activities of SSC-s.

All the above mentioned quality assurance bodies have been represented in the steering committee for governing the referencing process.

7) *The referencing process shall involve international experts.*

The following persons were involved in the referencing process of the EstQF to the EQF: Carita Blomqvist (Finland), Margaret Cameron (UK) and Baiba Ramina (Latvia). International experts participated in the referencing process starting from December 2010, when they received the first

version of the referencing report. In February 2011 oneday meeting was held with international experts, where the steering committee discussed comments and suggestions of experts. These included particularly explanation of the logic behind the structure of EstQF and placement of general education qualifications. International experts had also a possibility to comment the final version of the report in August 2011. No international expertise has been used in preparing this report.

8) *The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications with the EstQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the NCP, and shall address separately each of the criteria (LO descriptors).*

This report is a summary of assigning EstQF level to all types of Estonian qualifications with the relevant supporting evidence. The report has been approved by the steering committee including representatives of competent national bodies and stakeholders.

The reference of general education qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in three regulations of the Government of the Republic: National Curriculum for Basic Schools, Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools and National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools. The summary of an analysis based on the types of LOs is presented in the report.

The reference of VET qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in the Government of the Republic regulation: VET Standard. The summary of an analysis based on the types of LOs is presented in report.

The reference of higher education qualifications to the EstQF has been laid down in the Government of the Republic regulation: Higher Education Standard. The summary of an analysis based on the types of LOs is presented in the report.

The reference of occupational qualifications to the EstQF is determined by the SSC of the relevant occupational field. This information is presented in the register of occupational qualifications (www.kutsekoda.ee). The methodology of the analysis based on the types of LOs is presented in the report.

9) *The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.*

Estonia completed the referencing process of its qualifications to the EQF and obtained a confirmation on the positive result of the external evaluation by the EQF Advisory Group in October 2011. This report has subsequently been included into the EQF official platform including examples of qualifications.

The report in Estonian and English has also been published on the web site of the MoER (http://www.hm.ee), on the website of the EstQA (http://www.kutsekoda.ee) and on the website of the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre (http://www.archimedes.ee/enic).

10) *Following the referencing process, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference to the appropriate EstQF level.*

Starting from 2012 institutions awarding higher education qualifications and occupational qualifications are adding a reference to the corresponding EQF and EstQF level to the issued qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents, incl. academic transcripts and Diploma Supplements, provided that the corresponding qualification meets all the requirements for inclusion into the EstQF. Since September 2013 institutions awarding VET qualifications are adding a reference to the corresponding EQF and EstQF level to the issued qualification certificates. Since May 2014 institutions awarding general education qualifications are adding a reference to the corresponding EQF and EstQF level to the issued qualification certificates.

The full version of the report "Referencing of the Estonian Qualifications and Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework" is available here: http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kvalifikatsiooniraamistik/ekr_tutvustus/suhestamine