

## Active Leisure Qualifications Incorporated into NQFs

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## 1. Introduction

The Blueprint for Skills Cooperation and Employment in Active Leisure project focuses on developing new skills for current and future workers, for improving employability of young people, and supporting entrepreneurship and growth across the sector.

This paper provides an overview of the context and development journey of the BLUEPRINT *Intellectual Output 10 – Active Leisure Qualifications Incorporated into NQFs*. This journey has been a fruitful and developmental one, albeit because of shifting environments and priorities, not the one expected at the beginning of the process.

It should be read in conjunction with the other BLUEPRINT Intellectual Output reports to provide further background. In particular there is a direct relationship with *IO 9 – Testing, trialling and refining development of new qualifications, awarding organisation and recognition of prior learning*.

## 2. Intention of IO 10

IO 10 was developed to support the mobility of skilled workers in the Fitness and Outdoor sectors, across Member States. It was perceived as an integral part of the project to ensure that an individual who had trained in one Member State could easily move to another one, and transition into new employment with as few barriers as possible. International, or sectoral qualifications are one way of supporting mobility by potentially allowing recognition of single qualifications in multiple Member States.

This aspiration is very much in line with the European Union principle of free movement of labour and services and was especially expressed as a priority in the last Commission through the New Skills Agenda. Specifically, IO 10 was developed to bring life to the initial direction of the Expert Group on Human Resources Development which reported in 2017 and which included a further call for more qualifications (in sport and active leisure) to be included on NQFs which in turn are ferenced to the EQF.

This narrative sets the historical perspective of the importance of developing and delivering qualifications across the Active Leisure Sector. Critical to the development and implementation of this work has been a close engagement between the employer representative organisations of EHFA (now EuropeActive) and the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE) with the European Commission, and in coordination and respect of the national sovereign responsibilities (viz. the principle of subsidiarity), that Member States have in all areas of education and training.

### 3. Historical Developments

#### 3.1. The Fitness pathway

In 2002 the organisation we now know as EuropeActive came into existence to help support the professionalisation of the Fitness sector in Europe. At that time the perceived strategy was a two-pronged approach to develop standards for people (e.g. qualifications), and standards for places (fitness clubs and facilities).

The first priority was to consider the concept of some pan-European or a 'harmonised' approach to developing occupational standards for fitness trainers. Some initial research was done to what existed at that time, and this was considerably enhanced by the first Leonardo da Vinci funded project called EUROFIT-QST in 2004. For the first time a skills and competency framework based on a functional map of the main occupations (at that time) in the Fitness sector was defined. Eight different European countries formed the project partnership (BE, CH, FR, IE, IT, NL, SE, UK).

The project identified that there was a very mixed picture across Europe in respect of training provision, in terms of content, assessment and in the provision for overall quality assurance (especially in VET). In addition, those stakeholders in the Fitness sector were working very much in competition with each other, with very little collaboration to grow the sector for the benefit of everyone else, and to move the sector forward in a way which could be aligned with the principles of the European Union.

Even in 2002 there were already very high levels of mobility across fitness professionals not just around Europe, but across the world. There was clearly a need for better skilled workers to service the growing numbers of customers and to support their employers (fitness club operators) in a quality-managed way.

The EUROFIT-QST project was done with the background of the emerging Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), which was initiated in 2002 in the Copenhagen Declaration, and which identified three core elements to improving the content, quality and reliability of vocational education and training for the future:

- EQF (European Qualification Framework) <sup>1</sup>
- ECVET (European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training) <sup>2</sup>,
- EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training) <sup>3</sup>,
- A fourth pillar in the form of Europass was also a feature of the LLP.

To support the implementation of the LLP the European Health and Fitness Association (EHFA, the forerunner to EuropeActive) and SPRITO (the UK National Training Organisation for Sport, Recreation and Allied Industries) were working with partners to identify what skills were required by the sector, and what the associated qualifications should look like. Despite a potentially understandable level of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-efq>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/the-european-credit-system-for-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/the-european-credit-system-for-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet_en)

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/the-european-credit-system-for-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/the-european-credit-system-for-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet_en)

cynicism about the possibility of getting to a point of consensus, the project developed some practical steps to forward an initial agreement between the 8 project partners in 2005.

Following the completion of the Leonardo da Vinci project EUROFIT-QST, the European Health and Fitness Association (EHFA) was restructured to enable the association to become a standards-setting body for the Health and Fitness industry in Europe. This initiative, plus the continued interest of DG EAC and the new Sport Unit of the European Commission (within DG EAC) had encouraged EHFA to take the lead, supported by SkillsActive (UK) in a second Leonardo da Vinci project called ECVET-Fitness (2007). The EUROFIT-QST project had produced a functional map, competence framework, occupational standards, learning outcomes and a verification system for the technical competence of Fitness Instructors, as well as the “soft launch” of the European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS).

The ECVET-Fitness project worked towards the creation of a new ECVET framework, building on previous findings of qualifications and standards which had been developed. It was expected that this would be used by Awarding Bodies and Training Providers across Europe to demonstrate the transparency of their training programmes.

With the imminent approval of the EQF the decision of EHFA was to look for some key ways that this work would support the Fitness sector by respecting the main instruments of the LLP. The integration of the framework to be developed was to be the basis of the future of the EREPS structure and website, enabling those requiring training and employers seeking to employ those with the required skills, to see quickly and easily the programmes endorsed at the European level through a transparent and independent process.

The expected impact in the longer term was planned to be:

- Increased mobility of health and fitness professionals across Europe;
- Promotion of ‘best practices’ in health and fitness instruction and training across Europe;
- The promotion of a healthy lifestyle to all European citizens;
- Improved customer confidence in fitness instruction;
- Guaranteed quality of fitness instruction and quality endorsed training centres;
- Pan-European qualification systems, which can be validated and assessed in a number of individual EU Member States.

The investment into the skills agenda and the need for better qualifications was increasing at this time as the Fitness sector was rapidly growing on an annual basis. There were notable skills gaps and shortages being identified by employers together with increasing levels of mobility which prioritised the planning for EHFA in the development of the European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS) in 2008. This was based on a clear set of occupational standards underpinning the three largest recognised occupations of fitness instructor, group fitness instructor and advanced instructor at the time. To improve the supply of new fitness trainers and to raise the quality of VET (Vocational Education and Training) provision, EHFA also initiated an accreditation programme which was to be overseen by independent verifiers.

A third EU-funded project called European Fitness Accreditation (2008-2010) was led by Central YMCA Qualifications in the UK (CYQ). The project reviewed and updated EHFA’s standards for the three main occupations as described above. In addition, the partners researched into current trends, existing qualifications and the capacity of national associations to oversee the skills agenda in their own countries. The project included the piloting of accreditation of 14 training organisations over 2 years on what was considered necessary to create a significant start and critical mass which would be required for the future promotion of EHFA standards. These were intended as the European benchmark for VET within Health and Fitness sector, and as a step in the direction of ‘harmonisation’. It proposed that there should be an integration of the occupational standards within the EREPS structure and that they would be posted onto the EREPS website with open public access. The longer term impact was expected to be:

- Increased mobility of health & fitness professionals across Europe;
- Promotion of best practice in health & fitness instruction and training across Europe;
- Improved customer confidence in fitness instruction;
- Quality endorsed training organisations;
- Pan-European qualification systems.

In 2008 EHFA launched its own independent Standards Council comprised of experts across the sector who cooperated in the development of what became known as the Fitness Sector Qualification Framework (SQF):

EQF/SQF (Bologna Process)	General Population		Special Population	
	<b>7 and 8</b>			
<b>6</b>	<b>Advanced Health and Exercise Specialist</b>			
<b>5</b> (short cycle)			<b>Exercise for Health Specialist</b> <b>Pre-diabetes Exercise Specialist</b> <b>Weight-management Exercise Specialist</b>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Personal Trainer</b> <b>Pilates Trainer</b> Wellbeing and Lifestyle Coach (low risk)		<b>Youth Fitness Trainer (12-17 years)</b> <b>Children’s Fitness Trainer (6-11 years)</b> <b>Active Ageing Trainer</b>	
<b>3</b>	<b>Fitness Instructor</b> <b>Group Fitness Instructor</b> <b>Group Exercise to Music</b> <b>Aqua Fitness Instructor</b>			
<b>2</b>	<b>Fitness Assistant</b>		Community Activator	

*Tabel 1. Fitness Sector Qualification Framework (SQF)*

The first Chairman of the Standards Council was Prof. Dr Alfonso Jimenez from Madrid European University who oversaw the election of 9 independent experts from across Europe who would serve a 3-year term as Council members. They in turn organised a series of Technical Expert Groups to develop and/or review occupational standards to support the occupations listed in the SQF. The number of experts involved in this work exceeded 200.

For the first time the SQF informally referenced the fitness occupations (all supported by comprehensive occupational standards and occupational role definitions) to EQF levels, and also to the Bologna Process for higher education. By 2010 this had become quite familiar across the Fitness sector and greatly helped the individual fitness trainers and employers to understand the different occupations and their qualification levels. By this time the titles of 'basic' and 'advanced' fitness trainers had been superseded by the occupations of fitness instructor and personal trainer.

Also, in 2010 the EQF Conference held at Dublin Castle by the Commission and CEDEFOP recognised that sectors (or international organisations as they are now more commonly called) had begun to use the EQF for their own training programmes. A connection with sector qualifications was originally envisaged in the 2008 EQF framework of implementation, and during the first working programme for the EQF there was an expectation of some direct referencing or relationship between the EQF and sector qualifications. In the Dublin Castle Conference conclusions there was the statement on the expected position of Sectoral Qualifications and Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks:

*“The level of understanding that exists within and between sectors adds value to overall cohesiveness at national and European level. The relationship of sectoral qualifications to national qualifications frameworks and the two meta-frameworks (editor note = EQF and Bologna), needs to be clarified in order to realise lifelong learning and to facilitate permeability between vocational education & training (VET) and higher education (HE). Further clarity should be sought on appropriate ways to achieve such recognition through national and meta-frameworks.”*

Around the same time, and also interplaying with the development of the LLP and in the specific support of mobility of workers, Directive 2005/36 EC (concerning the mutual recognition of qualifications from one member state to another) was to be reviewed. The European Commission could see that national protectionism mechanisms and other regulations presented numerous examples of how mobility was being impaired in practice, and so to give a new impetus (in Member States) the Dublin Conference committed to:

*“The proposed 2012 review of European Directive 2005/36/EC gives a timely opportunity for an update, in line with recent competence-based developments in education and qualifications systems, to clarify the interplay between the Directive and European meta-frameworks.”*

### **3.2. The Outdoors pathway**

Although the Outdoor sector originated independently from the Fitness sector, there have been connections and contacts over the last 15 years. It is therefore not surprising that the Outdoor sector also paid attention to the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and the developments regarding vocational education training (VET).

An additional parallel development is that the professional federation EC-OE also emerged through cooperation in various European projects.

During the EQFOA project (2006-2008) employer federations from Belgium (BFNO), The Netherlands (VeBON), France (France Plein Air), Portugal (APECATE) and Ireland (ILAM) decided to join forces and to establish the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE). Unfortunately, a few years later ILAM did not survive the economic crisis in Ireland. In 2009 EC-OE welcomed Spain (ANETA), in 2010 Switzerland (SOA), in 2012 Greece (HATEOA) and in 2015 the Czech Republic (CF-OA) as new full members.<sup>4</sup> In 2019 the Belgian WANT (Wallonia) joined and finally at the beginning of 2020 IAAT (the Irish federation) and Bavarian/Verband Allgäuer Outdoor Unternehmen also became members of EC-OE.

The above mentioned EQFOA project (2006-2008) was in fact the first in a cycle of three European research projects the Outdoors engaged in.<sup>5</sup>

Project	Aim	Main Output and Deliverables
EQFOA	Describing the sector	Functional Map & Competence Framework
CLO2	Developing learning outcomes from the competencies identified in EQFOA	Learning Outcomes Framework
ELESA	Developing a number of teaching and learning modules from CLO2	Dedicated training Syllabus

*Table 2. Research projects towards a dedicated training syllabus for the Outdoor Animator*

Following on from the EQFOA (2006 – 2008) and CLO2 (2008-2010) projects, ELESA is the keystone of this three projects cycle. Its culmination is a dedicated training programme for professional Outdoor Animators to work in the sector.

From the start of this research process, the focus was always on the competences that an Outdoor Animator needed to master, in order to operate successfully in the commercial Outdoor sector. These competencies led to the identification of corresponding learning outcomes. The resultant learning outcomes were divided into Soft skills (non-technical) and Hard skills (technical), in order to clearly differentiate all the generic competencies involved in outdoor animation from the pure technical competences linked to an activity. This avoids falling into the trap of reducing an outdoor animator to a ‘technician’ of the outdoors.

The 40 learning outcomes generated in CLO2 are ordered into 12 Module Descriptors (soft skills). The ‘hard skill’ requirements (per selected outdoor activity) are outlined in the ‘Professional Technical

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec-oe.eu/about-us/defining-the-outdoors/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ec-oe.eu/ec-oe-home/ec-oe-projects/elesa/>

Capacities' (PTCs) Descriptors which identify the minimum technical ability / competence, required for an Outdoor Animator to operate in a given commercial setting.

From the very beginning, the ELESA training syllabus was informally positioned at EQF level 5 which means ELESA is dedicated to vocational education offered by Short Cycle Higher Education.

### 3.3. The Active Leisure Pathway

Around 2012 EHFA had started an informal cooperation with the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE) in recognising many synergies about defining a political position and shared competencies between some fitness trainers and outdoor animators.

This was brought into sharp focus with the start of a pilot phase of social dialogue in the sport and Active Leisure Sector started in 2012, and quickly followed by the Eurofound study of representativeness in 2013.<sup>6</sup> This Study identified that EHFA for Fitness, and EC-OE for the Outdoor sector were representative employer organisations for the purposes of social dialogue. The trial process was extended for a number of years before finally closing in 2018 without realising much progress in the field of social dialogue.

From around 2008 the description of 'Sport and Active Leisure' has been increasingly used to define the sector and specifically the concept of 'for profit sport' (including elite and sport professionals), 'not for profit sport' (including volunteering and grassroots sports) and 'Active Leisure' being a combination of the Fitness and Outdoor sectors. In 2014-15 through the European Skills Competencies Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)<sup>7</sup> sector referencing of its main occupations, the Active Leisure sector confirmed its definition as:

*"Active Leisure is a combination of fitness and outdoor-based activities that are generally unstructured and non-competitive. They promote active, healthy lifestyles through activities, events and exercise. They are commonly provided under the direction of qualified animators or instructors so that the activities are tailored to match the abilities of the participants and meet their needs in an enjoyable and safe way."*

*"The Fitness sector uses qualified instructors and trainers to deliver diverse, structured exercise programmes that help people of all ages and abilities to improve their health, muscle and cardiovascular endurance, coordination, balance, agility and flexibility. Fitness programmes also build a feeling of individual wellbeing that establishes and helps to maintain a healthy balance of mind, body and spirit."*

*"The Outdoor sector uses outdoor related activities (canoe, rafting, horse riding, ... etc.) as the basis of delivery of a recreational or personal development service. Outdoor providers do not generally offer competitions. The Outdoor sector uses qualified animators or instructors to deliver these outdoor*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2013/representativeness-of-the-european-social-partner-organisations-sport-and-active-leisure-industry>

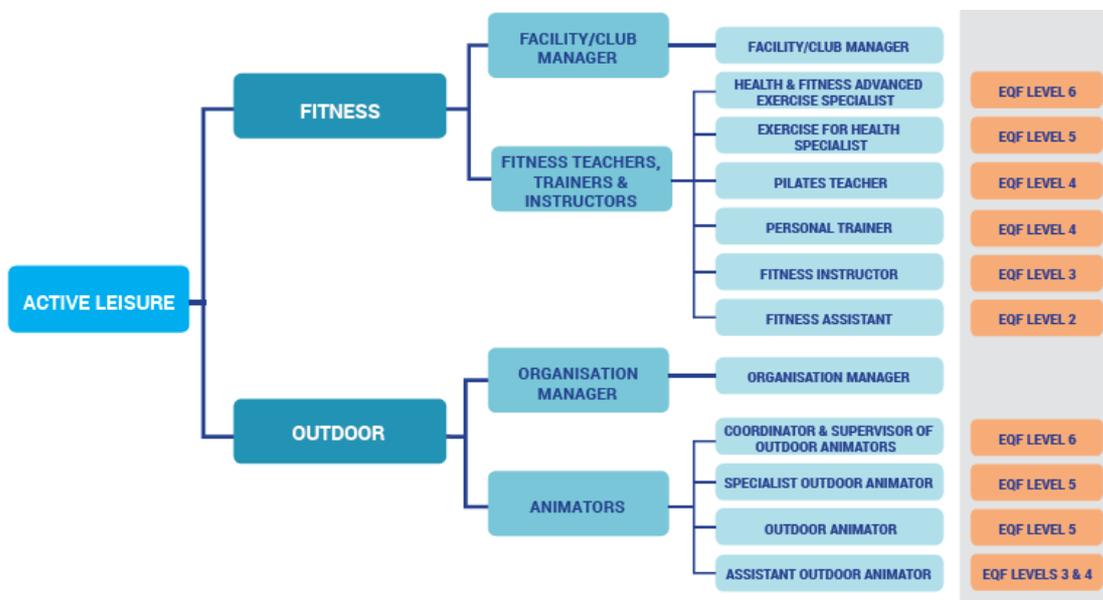
<sup>7</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/qualification>

activities in a context of fun, recreation, tourism, outdoor learning or engagement with the natural environment.”

As the EU-wide representatives of the Fitness and of the Outdoor sectors identified as the main actors of the Active Leisure sector according to the Eurofound Study on Representativeness and as defined within the NACE Rev.2 classifications 93.13 (Fitness facilities) and 93.29 (other amusement and recreation activities). There are an estimated 1 million workers in the Active Leisure sector.

In 2012 EuropeActive joined with the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE) to launch the Active Leisure Alliance, which has since developed into the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure in 2016.

The cooperation between EuropeActive and EC-OE was deepened during the ESCO referencing work in 2014-15 and resulted in the Active Leisure sector occupational framework.



ESCO – Sport and Active Leisure Organogram\_v12 April 2015

Figure 1. Active Leisure organogram

The ESCO programme explored a range of sectors across the Member States in 2014-15. This involved the referencing of Standards and Occupational Descriptors to identify what makes different occupations unique. The referencing was completed in 2015 with the development of the SQF for the Active Leisure Sector as shown above. Each occupation was described by the essential skills needed to be competent in that role.

EuropeActive and EC-OE were selected by the Commission for this work because they were recognised as the sector representativeness organisations. To achieve this recognition, or to make such claims, it is necessary as the start point for the international or sector organisation to establish its credibility and validity. The Eurofound Study had concluded the “rights” of EuropeActive and EC-OE, but through

the earlier SIQAF project<sup>8</sup> (see also below), a further step in developing credibility was initiated through the establishing of a fully operating sector skills alliance.

There should only be one ‘rightful’ Sector Skills Alliance who can propose a qualification that purports to provide its workers with the skills they need and to meet employer needs and expectations as the representative of the sector or international organisation. The ESCO experience forced thinking around the uniqueness of the qualification supporting the occupation which means that the provenance of the organisation should be without question. This leads to the expectation of sector representativeness, inclusiveness of its stakeholders and overall objectives.

#### 4. Understanding the sector and its people

To claim to be the representative organisation requires some thought and action to determine the characteristics of what it represents – how many people, what are the key occupations, the essential skills, what are the gaps, shortages and foresight to ensure that there are enough workers in the right place with the right skills at the right time.

This also requires an implicit understanding of the capacity of training provision and their involvement with sector strategic planning. It moves beyond traditional collective bargaining and into the realms of a more inclusive way of working.

During this period an EU-funded project called DIAL<sup>9</sup> which was focused on ‘capacity-building’ for employers at a national level. This proved successful and one of the key topics was based on developing the workforce and especially the skills of workers in Active Leisure. Over 150 employers from 22 different European countries directly influenced the development and thinking of future skills needs for employees in the Active Leisure Sector.

This work was taken into a specially funded EU action called SIQAF as noted above, which put EuropeActive and EC-OE into an intense relationship with the work of DG EMPL. The project looked at all of the instruments, processes and procedures needed to ensure the outcome is transparent and quality-assured through the active leisure sector skills council. There were 5 main components to the project:

1. The occupational standards used in active leisure are already based on the learning outcomes approach, but the project demonstrated that they have been developed in a transparent way, and that meet the approval of the principal stakeholders of the sector (viz. employers, employees, VET providers and higher education). The processes will need to be carefully explained and verified;
2. The sector will need to set-up appropriate procedures for including the (nominated) occupational standards into the SQF, and within the level descriptors of the EQF. This process will need to be a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.active-leisure-alliance.eu/projects>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.europeactive-euaffairs.eu/projects/DIAL>

transparent and to be justified in its rigor, so that it is considered proportionate and appropriate in its application;

3. There will need to be clearly demonstrable processes and procedures to show underpinning quality assurance arrangements, and/or if this is not currently satisfactory what mechanisms will need to be put into place to provide for those reliable quality assurance processes. For any sector this is perhaps the most challenging area;
4. There is the involvement of an (international) expert(s) that will build the proposition that the requirement of showing a clear and demonstrable link between the SQF levels and those of the EQF is substantiated. The position of the external expert will also serve as the proof that the referencing of the active leisure SQF to the EQF is robust, reliable, and has been done in a transparent and open manner;
5. Of the 10 principles established by the EQF Advisory Board for the Member State NQF referencing to the EQF, numbers 1-8 inclusive were used as the basis so that, as far as is possible, and within the current terms of reference the SQF position will replicate that of an NQF.



Figure 2. SIQAF pathway diagram

It is clear from the SIQAF pathway diagram that the intention was to develop a transparent, quality-assured system which would allow for Active Leisure qualifications to be entered onto NQFs. The importance of adding sport (and active leisure) qualifications has been a focus of the work of the various DG EAC Expert Groups on skills and human resources development. It is clear that the European Commission (represented through the work of the Expert Groups of the Sport Unit) have been encouraging the wider use of qualifications in sport and Active Leisure to be included onto NQFs. The first Expert Group reporting from 2009 concluded a recommendation in 2012 at its Poznan meeting that:

*“specific attention was asked for a follow-up of the inclusion of sport qualifications in NQFs...”*

and,

*“The inclusion of all sport qualifications in an NQF should improve the transparency of the value of all qualifications to general national and international standards but also the transparency and value of the formal and non-formal education systems towards each other...”*

However, progress in this area across the wider sector has been slow in implementation. In 2020 the Expert Group on Skills and Human Resources Development guidelines informed the Croatian Presidency whose Conclusions include <sup>10</sup>:

*“9. The Council conclusions on the role of coaches in society point out that the work of coaches is associated with responsibility, skills and competences, and one of the issues mentioned refers to expanding coaches’ opportunities for lifelong learning and education. In this regard, Member States were invited to support the development of prior learning and a lifelong-learning system, and to promote, within the sports education system, a learning outcomes’ approach based on both national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF) goals and the inclusion, where appropriate, of coaching qualifications in NQFs with reference to the EQF.”*

In a nutshell, the incorporation of qualifications from the Sport and Active Leisure sectors onto NQFs remain a priority, but progress for a number of reasons is still limited.

The work on IO 10 has been an attempt to move this work forward, but has been hampered by two main factors:

1. the shifting political will for MS to work together on sectoral/international qualifications aligned to their NQFs and the EQF and
2. the inability of the EQF Advisory Group to determine the route(s) of recognition of international qualifications.

These are explained in BLUEPRINT IOs 3, 4 and 9 more fully.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0611\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0611(01)&from=EN)

Following the financial crisis (2008), the European Commission put considerable focus on the importance of the principles of the Union in encouraging reductions in national laws and restrictions which may limit the free movement of labour within the Union. The New Skills Agenda and within that the original purpose of ESCO were instruments to help in this regard.

Another route (which remains open to the Active Leisure Sector) is the utilisation of Directive 2005/36 EC as amended by Directive 2013/55 EU which positions the principle of mutual recognition of qualifications, mobility and internal market working to increase the transparency and recognition of qualifications. The application and effect of the Directive on the Active Leisure Sector is discussed at length in BLUEPRINT IO 2.

Essentially, in Article 49 of the above-mentioned Directive, there is the concept of a sector (or international organisation) to develop a multi-national qualification with the summarised outcome of:

- Common Training Framework (agreed qualification with learning outcomes, etc.)
- Common Training Test (consistent independent assessment and examination), and
- Recognition of achievement through a Professional Card (e.g., as the EREPS Programme, and for Mountain Guides for professional registration/recognition)

The Directive is highly unusual as it works through giving delegated powers to the European Commission – that is, potentially overriding national sovereignty in the area of qualification recognition because the use of the Directive is founded in European law which in this case sits above national law. However, Article 49 has been used to regulate long-lasting discussions such as for the Outdoor Sector position for ski instructors.

In 2016 the New Skills Agenda was introduced by the European Commission as an attempt to clarify skills and employment issues, and to explore a coherent plan to bring all the skills and employment issues together. It was clear there was work to be done across the EU, which mirrored some of the work the Fitness and Outdoors sector had already completed.

There was a general feeling of optimism that the embedding of sectoral qualifications would become possible through the project aligned to the ESCO project (SIQAF – The Relevance of The Active Leisure Sector & International Qualification Framework to the EQF). However, during the SIQAF project, DG Employment confirmed that this more integrated approach was not going to happen as the EQF Advisory Group had chosen a different strategy and that there was no support for sectoral qualifications to be placed wholesale on Members States NQFs as expressed in the Council Recommendations.

## 5. Challenges with the Production / Implementation of IO 10

IO 10 was an opportunity to explore what might be possible to support the initial intentions for the harmonisation of qualifications cross the Active Leisure Sector. As the new Skills Agenda draft report of findings and conclusions was published, it was clear that it was unlikely for there to be any direct relationship between international qualifications and the EQF in the foreseeable future and as originally conceived in 2008.

As discussions progressed EuropeActive were invited to the EQF Advisory Group to share a vision for the future from an international perspective. There was a mixed reception to engagement with international qualifications at this meeting, but there was a general agreement to further explore with some nations who are keen to move forward in collaboration. It was hoped some positive experiences would showcase the benefits of international qualifications on National Qualifications Frameworks.

The ELESA project provided further information and a qualification for Outdoor Animator, and the Fitness sector had developed the European Qualification for Personal Trainer (qualification, modules and assessment). The hope was that it would be possible to introduce these international qualifications into a domestic qualification. The Netherlands were keen to explore this as an option, and then to subsequently review how this might be rolled out to other Member States who were still keen to engage.

This process being formulated would mean that all due diligence would be completed in one Member State (viz. the Netherlands), and the EQF Advisory Group would then select 3-4 other MS for them to independently level the qualification against their NFQ (which in turn are referenced to the EQF). Through the proposed quality-assured process other Member States could then be more certain that the qualification was acceptable to their own NQFs, should they wish to consider adding it. Whilst there was much positive reaction to the process, the principle has still not been agreed by the EQF Advisory Group, although this was an expectation and requirement for the full development of the BLUEPRINT project based on the SIQAF Patway.

The BLUEPRINT partners considered that there were at least 4 main options available for progressing with the recognition and incorporation of international qualifications onto NQFs – or even perhaps in a combination of more than one of them. These were presented and discussed at the Expert Group for Skills and Human Resources Development (DG EAC) at their meeting in Lisbon in May 2019. The 4 options are outlined here:

OPTION 1

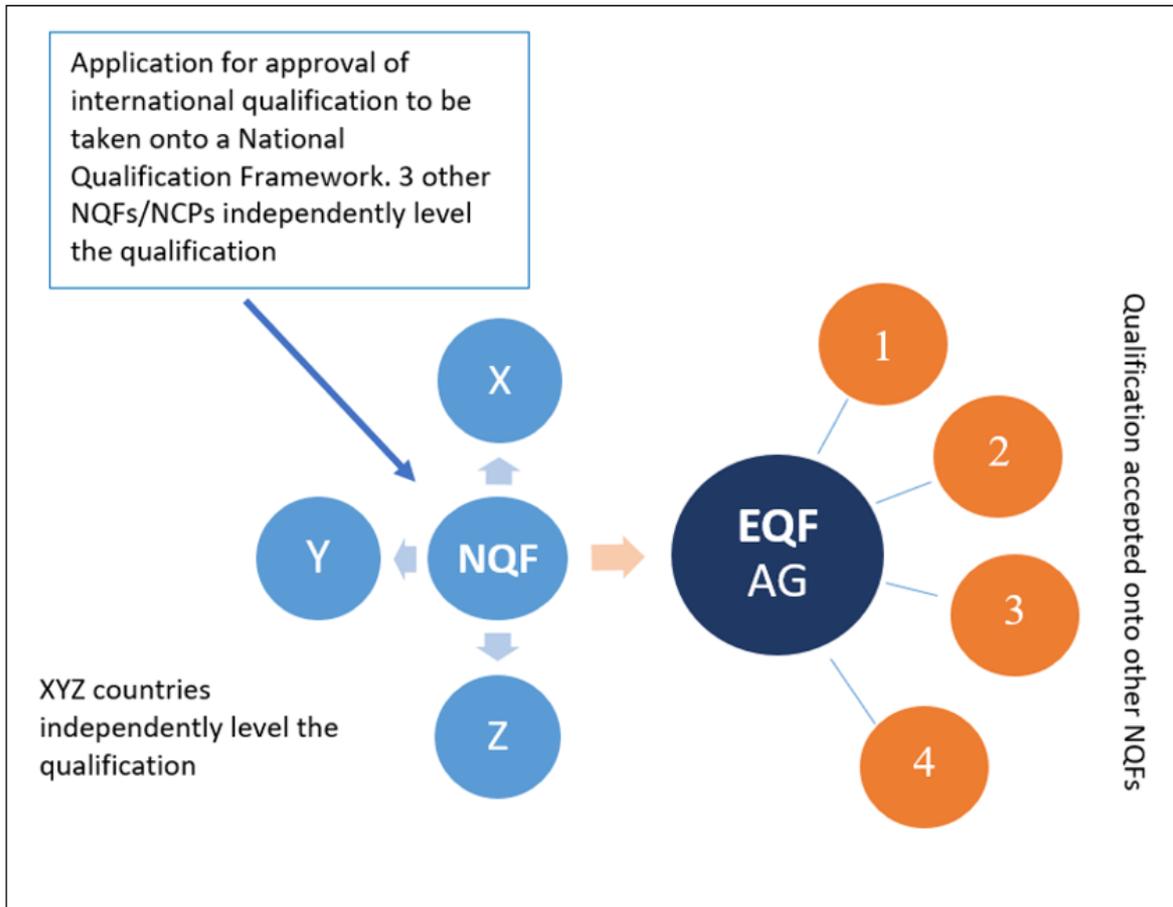


Figure 3. Application route for approval of international qualifications onto NQFs (Option 1)

This first option is based on the draft proposal of the EQF Advisory Group, but has not yet become a policy decision.

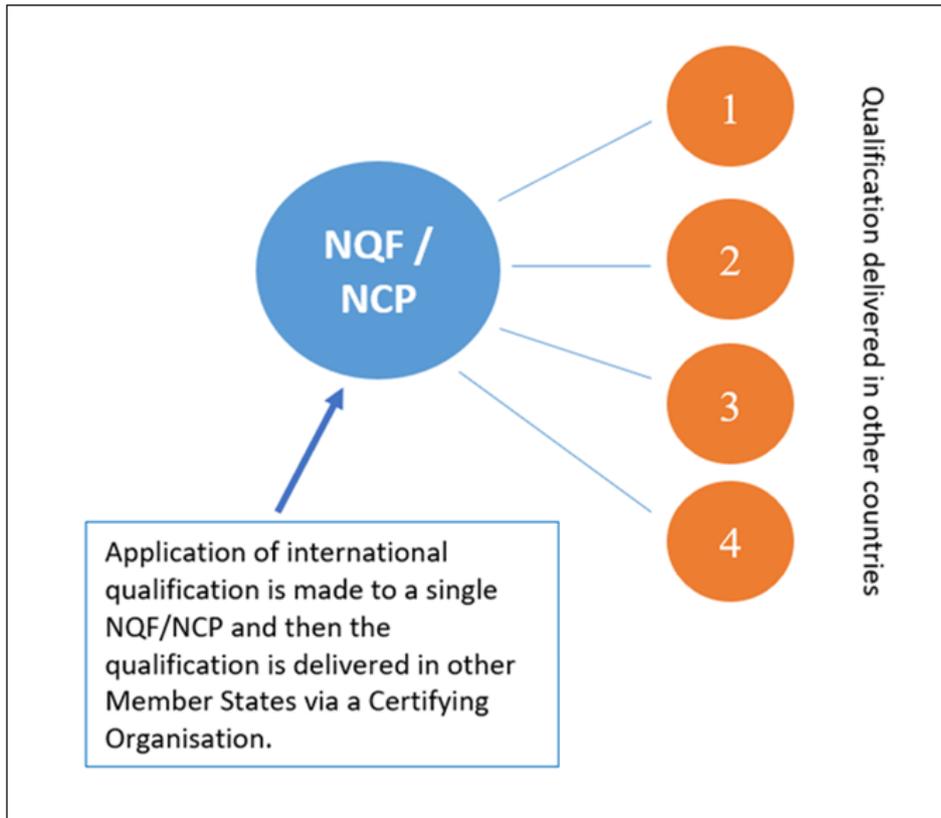
This was the preferred option of the BLUEPRINT project partners as it relies upon an open cooperation with the Member States. An application is made to a single NQF/NCP who will check all aspects of the qualification – its content, purpose, etc. and to ensure it is properly constructed in units of learning outcome. The NQF would also have to be certain of the quality assurance being provided by the international organisation (and this would most likely be through an independent process such as with a Certifying Organisation). At the same time the qualification would be sent to a further 3-4 NQFs who would independently level the qualification. The consensus result would then be put to the EQF Advisory Group who would check all processes had been completed to their expectations which would then open the opportunity for other NQFs to accept the qualification onto their own framework (and especially as it would have a ‘common’ EQF level).

As shown in the SIQAF pathway, above (see p.11), this route would be providing the learner with both a national qualification and a European ‘stamp’ as it is based on a common qualification and test.

**OPTION 1.2**

As above, but via an EQF Expert Group of 3-4 NQFs who check validity of qualification and independent levelling rather than it being take through a lead NQF. It is unlikely that this proposal will be forwarded as a recommendation by the EQF Advisory Group.

**OPTION 2**



*Figure 4. Application route for approval of international qualifications through 1 NQF (Option 2)*

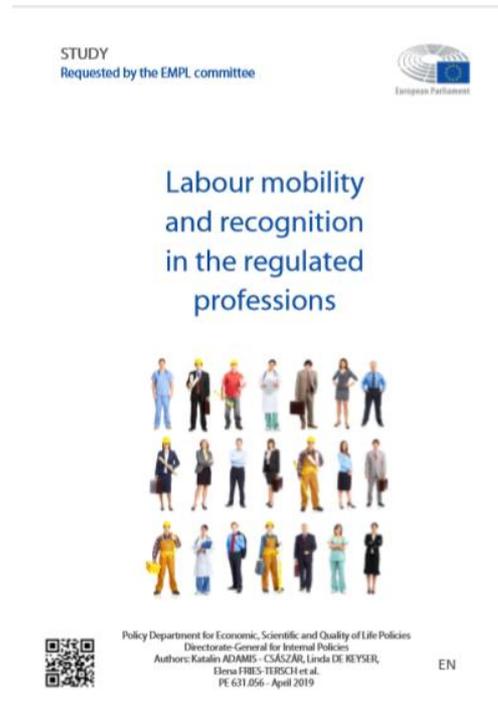
This option envisages the international qualification being submitted to a single NQF/NCP. The application would probably have to be made by a legal entity based in the country where the application is being made as it would be considered as a national qualification first and foremost. Thereafter the qualification can be delivered across Europe but based on the content and quality-assurance requirements imposed by the NQF.



**OPTION 3**

Implimentation of Art. 49b of the  
EU Professional Qualification  
Directive 2005/36/EC.

*(European Commision, 2019)*



European Parliament Study on the Use and Potential Development of the Directive <sup>11</sup>

Directive 2005/36/EC, or the Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD), establishes an EU system of recognition of professional qualifications to facilitate intra-EU mobility of professionals. The PQD was revised in 2013 (Directive 2013/55/EU) to further deregulate and simplify the EU recognition process in order to facilitate mobility of professionals within the EU. As an example of the Directive in action from the Outdoor sector:

*The profession of ski instructor or alternatively the education and training leading to the qualification as a ski instructor is regulated in more than one third of Member States and therefore the requirements under Article 49b (2) of Directive 2005/36/EC are fulfilled. This Regulation establishes the contents of the Common Training Test ('CTT') and the conditions to be fulfilled for both participating in and passing of the CTT. The CTT shall comprise of a test certifying technical ability of ski instructors and a test certifying safety-related competences of ski instructors in accordance with the rules laid down in the 'Delegated Regulation 2019/907'. This Delegated Regulation shall be binding in its entirety and directly applicable in all Member States.*

Importantly, the 'Delegated Regulation 2019/907' only applies for the highest ski instructor qualifications (as listed in Annex 1) and, moreover, the DR clearly stipulates that:

11

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/631056/IPOL\\_STU\(2019\)631056\\_EN.pdf#:~:text=Labour%20mobility%20and%20recognition%20in%20the%20regulated%20professions,trends%20in%20mobility%20and%20recognition%2C%20focussing%20on%20the](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/631056/IPOL_STU(2019)631056_EN.pdf#:~:text=Labour%20mobility%20and%20recognition%20in%20the%20regulated%20professions,trends%20in%20mobility%20and%20recognition%2C%20focussing%20on%20the)

*“for ski instructors who are not eligible to participate in the CTT or who have not passed the CTT, the general framework for recognition of their qualifications under Directive 2005/36/EC would continue to apply.”<sup>12</sup>*

**OPTION 4**

Implementation of CEN  
Industrial safety standards.

(Fitness sector only)



The use of other instruments to direct VET and qualifications through a quality-assured route that improves harmonisation and the use of common standards. In 2019 Part 1 of CEN standards - EN 17229: 2019 - ‘Fitness centres - Requirements for centre amenities and operation’ came into effect in a majority of European countries.

Part 2 of the CEN standards covers the supervision (of users) by fitness staff.

The new European standards include “specifying the knowledge skills and competencies for fitness trainers to ensure that their exercise instruction is safe and effective for the users of fitness facilities”.

In describing the qualifications needed by fitness staff the norms used in the proposed CEN standards are based on EuropeActive’s occupational standards as described through the ESCO process as ‘essential skills’. Whilst the CEN standards do not have legal force they become, over time, the accepted good practices and are used to support insurance and legal decisions on whether an employer/operator has worked to relevant and industry expected guidelines. Part 2 of EN17229 will be completed in early 2021.

<sup>12</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019R0907>

## 6. Where we are in 2020 with the use of Active Leisure qualifications on NQFs

The general view of the EQF Advisory Group seems to be that, if more than one NQF accepts the international qualification then it should be reasonable for others to accept the same qualification. This requires a high level of trust between the NQFs which at present is not evident. Given that Active Leisure qualifications (and/or the occupational standards that support them) can be found on a number of NQFs already (and in part through the BLUEPRINT project), there is an argument that other NQFs should already be more accepting of their value and appropriateness.

This is the current position of the use of Active Leisure qualifications/occupational standards.

<b>FITNESS (Personal Trainer)</b> In use	<b>OUTDOORS (Animator)</b> In use
Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia)	Belgium (Flanders)
UK	France
Poland	Greece
Netherlands	Portugal
In development	
France (CQP)	Republic of Ireland
Republic of Ireland	
Czech Republic	

*Table 3. Current use of Active Leisure qualifications / occupational standards*

## 7. Conclusions

In addition to the BLUEPRINT partners, other experts have contributed to the development and potential use of Active Leisure qualifications. The debates, reviews and discussions have considered many aspects of improving the quality-assurance and reliability of the qualifications in practice. As described elsewhere in the BLUEPRINT IO's the range of considerations has been extensive to include, for example, the purpose of delivery through a certifying organisation, and the awarding of ECVET and ECTS points. The debates were held during partner meetings but also critically in the meetings of the Sector Skills Alliance (as outlined in IO 3). This industry consultation was an important 'touch-stone' to check that the concepts and purposes were in line with employer and other stakeholder expectations.

Discussions were ongoing when the Covid-19 crisis stopped normal business with NQFs and vocational training companies, making the choices for further development and progress in this area virtually impossible. In particular there were advanced plans for EuropeActive to set-up a certifying organisation in the Netherlands in cooperation with the 'Koninklijke Nederlandse Krachtsport- en Fitnessbond' (KNKF) who would partner an introduction of the Personal Trainer qualification (outlined in IO 5) to the Netherlands NQF. As the EQF AG had not completed its recommendation the plan was based on option 2 as outlined above (see p.15).

Unfortunately, the COVID 19 pandemic and associated 'shut down' has stalled this process, to the extent it is highly unlikely that it will progress much further in the timescales of the BLUEPRINT project (2018-2020). The delivery and development partners are currently in lockdown or working with restrictions and are likely to be focussed on the practicalities of survival when they do return to work. The opportunity presented by IO 10 may well be something which will eventually be considered to support this 'recovery' but it is anticipated that a domestic focus for businesses across the Active Leisure Sector will be the priority initially.

A positive element is that some of the work which has been completed has aligned to IO 10. For example, the development of common assessment practices (online theory paper and online practical assessment) are proving incredibly useful tools not only during lockdown, but it is perceived they will be useful in a number of Member States in whatever the post-COVID 19 landscape looks like, but in any large scale they will be beyond the timeframe of BLUEPRINT.

It can be noted that for the Outdoor sector the ELESIA syllabus already provides for a "ready to use" common assessment strategy for the 'hard skills': the 'Professional Technical Capacity' (PTC) descriptors. The underlying assumption is that it does not matter where and/or how the candidate Outdoor Animator achieved the ability to master the agreed PTCs. What is most important is that he/she can prove his/her capacity to demonstrate the requested PTCs in the appropriate natural and technical environment as defined by the sector.

In the spirit of the intention of the Croatian Presidency Guidelines (June 2020), the Active Leisure Sector will continue to work with national partners to introduce its qualifications onto NQFs, but without the complicity of the EQF Advisory Group support through an option 1 type approach general progress will remain slow.

As other sectors have shown (such as the European Federation for Welding, Joining and Cutting), it is possible to work almost entirely outside of the EQF and NQFs for their training and certification for workers to be effective and the respected norm for their industry.

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