

Saniter, A. & Harberts, V. (2023). A sector qualification framework (SQF) level 2-7 for industrial shoe production. In V. Tütlys, L. Vaitkutė & C. Nägele (Eds.), *Vocational Education and Training Transformations for Digital, Sustainable and Socially Fair Future. Proceedings of the 5th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, Kaunas, 25. – 26. May* (pp. 395–399). European Research Network on Vocational Education and Training, VETNET, Vytautas Magnus University Education Academy, Institute of Educational Science. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7822364>

A Sector Qualification Framework (SQF) Level 2-7 for Industrial Shoe Production

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Abstract

In the years 2008 and 2017, the European parliament and the council published respective updated the European Qualification Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning to increase transparency and comparability of qualifications and the mobility of workers. Since then no or only very few advantages induced by QF have been published. One of the main reasons is the inherent broadness and openness of the descriptors of the levels. A promising approach to overcome this dilemma could be Sector Qualification Frameworks (SQF); ICSAS and DIA-CVET projects developed, implemented and evaluated a SQF level 2 to 7 for the sector of industrial shoe production.

Keywords

industrial shoe production, IVET, CVET, sector qualification frameworks (SQF), transparency

1 Background

In the years 2008 and 2017, the European parliament and the council published two recommendations to improve comparability of qualifications among member states, which refer to «the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning» (cp. EU 2008 and EU 2017). The European Qualification framework (EQF) consists of eight levels, starting with level one for (almost) unskilled workers and ending with level eight for PhD holders. European institutions like the Cedefop celebrate the recommendations and the follow-up since then: «Qualifications frameworks in Europe: a never-ending success story» (Cedefop 2018).

The neutrality and the added value of general Qualification Frameworks (QF), might they claim national or transnational relevance, has been questioned by researchers since the publication of the first recommendation in 2008. In 2010, Cort, P. highlighted the simple fact, that «policies are *never* neutral» (accentuation by the author) and analysed that «[t]his focus on outcome is closely tied to the marketisation of education and training». In 2015, Elken, M. published a contribution entitled «Vertical, Horizontal and Internal Tensions in the European Qualifications Framework» and concluded, that the «actual impact on national level practice remains to be seen». Still in 2023, few studies can be found that certify a positive “actual impact”, on the contrary, Winch, C. stated, based on the recent developments in the UK, that



«[t]he EU should do what the English have failed to do and analyse what is wrong with learning outcomes so that progress can be made» (Winch, 2023).

The authors of this paper share neither the euphoric view on EQF by European bodies nor the partially very critical perspective of colleagues (as long as the discussion is about qualifications – and not about units with ECVET-credits that proved their zombie-character after official funeral in their resurgence as “micro-credentials” – but this is another story). Probably the summary of Bohlinger, S. (2019), that QF are «somehow nothing but a paradigmatic case of travelling educational reforms»; a technocratic exercise with few impact, sketches the role of QF best.

Her conclusion is not surprising, as descriptors like «[a] range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study» (EQF, level 4, skills, EU 2008) are this generic, that various stakeholders might interpret it very, very different.

Some evidence has been published already (cp. europeactive 2018, newhealth 2022) that qualification frameworks, focussing on one sector only, might be a better option, as they offer the possibility to specify the mentioned «field of work or study» and to characterise the «range of cognitive and practical skills».

2 Research questions

Against this background, one of the issues tackled by the transnational Erasmus+ research and development projects ICSAS (Integrating Companies in a Sustainable Apprenticeship System) and DIA-CVET (Developing Innovative and Attractive Continuous Education and Training profiles) is the work on developing a Sector Qualification Framework (SQF) for the sector of industrial shoe production, referencing the qualifications from Romania, Portugal, Germany and (partly) Spain.

Leading questions in this regard have been:

- What are the relevant «fields of work or study», in both Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) and CVET? (These «fields of work or study» are named “Spheres of Activity (SoA)” in the projects.)
- How can the different expertise of professionals skilled in the various VET programmes of the mentioned countries be differentiated?
- Can the qualifications from the participating countries in the sector be levelled to the SQF?

3 Methodology

The approach combines desk research, Learning Station Analyses (LSA) and expert-workshops. After analysing SQF of other sectors (cp. europeactive 2018, newhealth 2022), a drafted structure has been developed; this structure has been modified via expert-workshop in the participating countries. The SQF level 2-4 is confirmed and has been endorsed by the relevant stakeholders in the sector. Currently the developed SQF level 5-7 is presented to experts from industrial shoe production and other sectors – crossing boundaries in VET is a marvellous option to expand this validation/feedback collection to an audience beyond the sector and the participating countries.

4 Findings

Regarding the first question, there was a broad consensus that nine Spheres of Activity are appropriate to describe the (potential) «fields of work or study» of IVET qualified, for CVET 13 Spheres of Activity have been identified (cp. ICSAS 2019, DIA-CVET 2021). Among those

4 are (partly) part of both qualification tracks, IVET and CVET, thus the overall SQF consists of 18 Spheres of Activity.

Findings on the second question, on how to differentiate the «range of cognitive and practical skills» of a qualification holder in the different Spheres of Activity, pointed in a unique dimension: the level of autonomy. That workers skilled via IVET or CVET have the necessary knowledge and skills for successful working on a task of a Sphere of Activity was self-evident for the experts consulted. Findings and the respective levelling of IVET (level 2-4) qualifications have already been published by Saniter, A. & Harberts, V. (2020). Regarding CVET, a new descriptor had to be introduced, whether some of the Spheres of Activity are part of a (mandatory) previous qualification (cp. table 1).

Table 1

Level of autonomy as descriptor for performance

	autonomous performance
	initiation
	Partly; e. g. planning of a single product
	not tackled
	part of previous qualification

With respect to the third question, levelling of IVET qualifications was very smooth and confirmed by all experts consulted (cp. ICSAS 2020). The SQF level 2-4 was confirmed as a general overview of all Spheres of Activity, levels and countries in one table as well as for each level of qualification for a better overview (cp. Saniter, A. & Harberts, V. 2020) Overall, 19 qualifications on levels 2-4 from Germany, Spain, Portugal and Romania have been levelled.

Regarding CVET, it must be taken into account that Spain does not participate anymore in the current project, that the number of Spheres of Activity is higher (18, including those of IVET) and that the amount of existing CVET qualifications is much lower (2 in Germany, 1 in Romania, none in Portugal). Thus, it was decided, to include a Portuguese IVET qualification on level 5 (footwear designer), the higher education (HE) programmes in Germany and Romania in the sector and the new trial qualifications developed and currently piloted in DIA-CVET, as well.

Table 2

Qualifications level 5-7 from DE, PT and RO, 2nd part of table refers to same qualifications as first part

Level 5-7										
Level according to EQF (Qualification)	Level 6 (DIA-CVET programme)	Level 6 (Footwear foreman, Industriemeister)	Level 6 (Footwear technician, Schuhtechniker/-in)	Level 6 (HE Bachelor, Leather- and Textile-technics)	Level 5 (DIA-CVET programme)	Level 5 (Technical Specialist in Footwear Design)	Level 5 (Footwear Manufacturing Technician/Foreman)	Level 7 (DIA-CVET programme)	Level 6 (BSc) Footwear Design and Production Engineer	Level 7 (MSc) Footwear Design and Production Engineer
Country	DE	DE	DE	DE	PT	PT	RO	RO	RO	RO
Spheres of activity in footwear sector	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting	Cutting
	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching	Stitching
	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting	Lasting
	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly
	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing	Finishing
	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design	Design
	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning	Production planning
	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development	Technical development
	Training Management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management	Training management
	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management	Maintenance Management
	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management	Quality Management
	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials	New Materials
	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management	Supply Chain Management
	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management	Social Responsibility Management
	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management	Sustainability Management
	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management	Environmental Management
	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM	STEM
	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety	Health and Safety

It must be considered, that the current “level of autonomy” documented in table 2 represents the self-estimation of the programme providers, minor modifications might have to be undertaken after the validation workshops in the three participating countries scheduled for 04./05.2023.

6 Outlook

The projects have delivered evidence that a SQF increases transparency of qualifications, especially in very specific areas of the labour market like industrial shoe production.

Thus, SQF seem to have a benefit, both for companies and skilled workers: In a globalised world, they could support companies in finding suitable staff and vice versa, to help professionals to estimate whether job announcements from abroad are appropriate for their skills and interests.

Additionally, and even more important, a unified SQF, including all career options via IVET, CVET and Higher Education (HE) might have the potential to increase not only transparency, but also permeability between educational tracks.

On the other hand, concerns published by other researchers as quoted in the section “background”, must be taken into account: A SQF should not have the consequence that it supports qualification providers (might they be public bodies or companies within dual education) switch from holistic vocations to “plug and play” micros-credentials.

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Biographical notes

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