

OVERVIEW OF THE QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS. THE BULGARIAN CASE

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Abstract: The paper presents research, conducted by author in order to identify the relation between the European Qualifications Framework and Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework and to position the European Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession in the Bulgarian's educational system. The comparative analysis is made using predefined criteria. The content analysis of the European Qualifications Framework and Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework gives the arguments for comparison. As the military qualification is a professional one, the author tries to compare the defined Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession qualifications with those of the Bulgarian Sectoral Qualifications Framework in order to decide about the cross-reference possibilities and application of the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession for Bulgarian Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession development.

Keywords: qualification; framework; learning outcomes; sectoral qualification framework

After development of the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession (SQF MILOF) in 2021 a lot of questions appear about the role and application of the EU military qualifications framework. The validation shows the adequacy of the military qualifications ranking and further analysis have to be made in order to incorporate the framework in the specific national systems for military education and qualification.

In order to organize the comparative analysis, the three frameworks will be explained highlighting on the general understanding, the structure, and the significance. Those will be used as criteria for the comparative analysis.

Because the SQF MILOF is generated based on EQF requirements, further analysis is made to identify the level of aligning between Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and SQF MILOF in order to create the necessary models for qualification of Bulgarian officers in line with the EU SQF MILOF.

1. Understanding the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

In today's rapidly evolving global job market, the need for a common framework to understand and compare qualifications across different countries and educational systems is essential. The European Qualifications Framework, commonly referred to as EQF, serves as an indispensable tool in addressing this issue. This chapter will explore the concept and significance of EQF, its structure, and its role in fostering mobility, transparency, and lifelong learning throughout Europe and beyond.

The European Qualifications Framework, or EQF, is a comprehensive framework that facilitates the comparison and understanding of qualifications from different education and training systems across Europe. Established in 2008, EQF provides a common reference system that links various national qualifications frameworks. It does not replace these frameworks but rather acts as a translation tool, ensuring that qualifications from different countries are understandable and comparable (European Parliament/Council 2008).

The EQF is structured into eight reference levels (table 1), which describe the learning outcomes associated with each level. These levels are designed to encompass all types of qualifications, from basic to advanced, and are generic in nature, making them applicable across various fields and disciplines. The EQF levels are described as follows (European Union 2009):

Table 1

	In the context of the EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.	In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).	In the context of the EQF, responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility
Level 1	Basic general knowledge.	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks.	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context.
Level 2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study.	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and solve routine problems using simple rules and tools.	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information.	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study. Adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study.	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change. Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities

<p>Level 5</p>	<p>Comprehensive, specialized, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study, and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.</p>	<p>A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems.</p>	<p>Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change. Review and develop performance of self and others</p>
<p>Level 6</p>	<p>Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles.</p>	<p>Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialized field of work or study.</p>	<p>Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts. Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups</p>
<p>Level 7</p>	<p>Highly specialized knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge, in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/ or research. Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields.</p>	<p>Specialized problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures, and to integrate knowledge from different fields.</p>	<p>Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches. Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice, and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams</p>

Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study, and at the interface between fields.	The most advanced and specialized skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/ or innovation, and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts, including research
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The EQF Significance could be explaining as:

- **Enhancing Mobility:** One of the primary purposes of EQF is to promote mobility, allowing individuals to move across borders within Europe to study or work. A person holding a qualification at a specific EQF level can have their skills and competencies recognized in other countries within the EU, thus facilitating employment and educational opportunities.

- **Promoting Transparency:** EQF ensures transparency by providing clear information on the competencies and knowledge associated with each qualification level. This transparency helps employers, educational institutions, and individuals understand the value and relevance of a particular qualification.

- **Supporting Lifelong Learning:** EQF encourages the idea of lifelong learning, emphasizing the importance of ongoing skill development and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. This concept is crucial in today's dynamic job market, where adaptability and continuous learning are essential.

- **Facilitating Educational and Professional Progression:** EQF serves as a tool for assessing an individual's qualifications and identifying pathways for further education or career advancement. It helps individuals understand how they can progress within their field of study or work.

It can be concluded, that the EQF plays a pivotal role in the European educational landscape and beyond by promoting mobility, transparency, and lifelong learning. As a comprehensive framework with eight reference levels, EQF facilitates the comparison of qualifications across different countries and enables individuals to explore new educational and professional opportunities. In an increasingly interconnected world, EQF stands as a vital tool in ensuring the recognition and understanding of qualifications, thus contributing to a more dynamic and competitive job market.

2. Understanding the Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

In today’s globalized world, the need for a standardized system to evaluate and compare qualifications across different education and training programs is essential. The Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) stands as a crucial tool in addressing this need. This chapter will delve deeper into the concept, structure, and significance of the Bulgarian NQF, exploring its role in promoting educational quality, transparency, and employability within the country.

The Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework (Ministerski savet 2012), commonly known as the NQF, is a comprehensive system designed to enhance the transparency, quality, and recognition of qualifications across Bulgaria’s education and training sectors. Established in 2012, the NQF provides a unified reference system that connects various levels and types of qualifications, from basic education to advanced degrees, under one standardized framework.

The NQF is structured into nine levels, with each level denoting specific learning outcomes and qualifications. These levels are intended to encompass all educational and training domains, promoting standardization and comparability. The NQF levels are as follows (figure 1):

Bulgarian educational system	
Higher education	
PhD degree	NQF/EQF level 8
Master degree	NQF/EQF level 7
Bachelor degree	NQF/EQF level 6
School education	
Professional education	NQF/EQF level 5
Secondary education	NQF/EQF level 4/3
Primary education	NQF/EQF level 2
Elementary education	NQF/EQF level 1
Pre-school education	NQF level 0

Figure 1

The significance of the NQF can be explained as:

- Promoting Educational Quality: The NQF serves as a tool for ensuring the quality of education and training programs within Bulgaria. It defines clear learning outcomes associated with each level, thereby raising standards and encouraging continuous improvement in the education system.

- **Enhancing Transparency:** The NQF enhances transparency in the education and employment sectors by providing a clear and standardized description of qualifications. This transparency helps individuals, employers, and educational institutions understand the qualifications' value and relevance.

- **Supporting Employability:** By connecting qualifications with specific levels within the NQF, it aids in bridging the gap between education and employment. Employers can better assess the qualifications and competencies of potential candidates, leading to more informed hiring decisions.

- **Facilitating Recognition:** The NQF simplifies the recognition process of qualifications both nationally and internationally. It allows for the comparison of Bulgarian qualifications with those in other countries, making it easier for students and professionals to seek educational or career opportunities abroad.

It can be summarized that the Bulgarian National Qualifications Framework is a vital instrument in Bulgaria's education and employment landscape, promoting educational quality, transparency, and employability. With its eight reference levels and standardized descriptions, the NQF ensures that qualifications are clearly defined, thus supporting educational excellence. It bridges the gap between education and employment, making qualifications more accessible and recognizable both within the country and abroad. As Bulgaria continues to develop its education and training sectors, the NQF remains central to these efforts, facilitating a more dynamic and competitive workforce.

3. The Sectoral Qualification Framework for Military Officers

The Sectoral Qualification Framework for military officers (SQF MILOF) is a comprehensive framework designed to enhance the professionalism, qualifications, and career development of military personnel within the armed forces. This essay delves into the concept, structure, and significance of the Sectoral Qualification Framework for Military Officers, commonly referred to as SQF MILOF. It explores the critical role SQF MILOF plays in fostering military excellence, standardization, and international recognition.

The Sectoral Qualification Framework for Military Officers (SQF MILOF) relates to lifelong learning for a particular sector: military officers. It is fully in line with the European Qualification Framework that is applicable in the general education system throughout the EU and partner countries in the Bologna process. The SQF-MILOF serves as an interface or 'translation tool' between the education and training opportunities offered in different countries, which makes it possible to compare different programs. This makes it easier to

recognize equivalent training done in another country, which in turn facilitates professional education and training exchanges between the EU members and thus enhances the creation of a common security and defence culture.

SQF MILOF is typically structured into multiple levels, each of which corresponds to a specific rank or position within the military hierarchy. The core business of the SQF-MILOF package is to frame professional learning for military officers into four levels of complexity and focus its scope on four levels of operations or military organizational architecture. In practical terms, the four levels of complexity of learning range from comprehensive (level 1) to the most advanced knowledge and professional skills (Level 4), whereas the four levels of professional military focus define relevant learning from the individual and low tactical level (Single Arm/Branch) (fig. 2) up to the strategic level (Political Civil-Military).

Levels	Level 1 EQF 5	Level 2 EQF 6	Level 3 EQF 7	Level 4 EQF 8
Knowledge	Comprehensive and specialised knowledge of the military domain.	Advanced knowledge of the military domain involving a critical understanding of the theory and principles of the military science and art.	Highly specialised knowledge of the military domain as the basis of original thinking across multiple branches/ services.	The most advanced knowledge of the military service and at the interface between the different military services
Skills	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop various creative options and plans to implement specific military tasks and actions.	Advanced skills, demonstrating the innovation required to solve complex unpredictable problems in the application of military science and art.	Specialised problem-solving skills required to advise and develop new knowledge and procedures and integrate knowledge from different branches or military services.	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques of the military domain, required to solve critical problems in research and/ or innovation, development of new knowledge, enabling a joint employment of military structures.
Responsibility and Autonomy	Exercise limited command and control functions of military activities in a fluid and continuously changing, unpredictable operating environment.	Exercise command and control of complex tactical and technical activities and tasks, taking responsibility for decision making in unforeseen circumstances. Take responsibility for managing professional development of subunits/units/ structures under his/ her responsibility.	Manage and transform complex military tasks and activities within unpredictable contexts with strategic consequences. Take responsibilities to lead and manage military organisations.	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy in the development of advanced and complex new military strategies and policies in the military domain including research. Take responsibility to lead and strategically manage joint organisations.

Figure 2

Significance of SQF MILOF

Enhancing Professionalism: SQF MILOF enhances the professionalism of military officers by defining the qualifications and competencies required at each career stage. This promotes standardized training and development.

Fostering Career Progression: SQF MILOF provides clear pathways for career progression, ensuring that officers receive appropriate training and development opportunities as they advance through the ranks.

Facilitating International Recognition: The framework enables international recognition of military qualifications and enhances interoperability with military forces from other countries. This is particularly crucial for joint military operations and peacekeeping missions.

Promoting Lifelong Learning: SQF MILOF encourages a culture of lifelong learning and skill development, recognizing that military officers must continually adapt to evolving threats and challenges.

It could be concluded that SQF MILOF is a vital component in the professional development and standardization of military personnel. By defining the qualifications, skills, and competencies required at each career level, SQF MILOF promotes excellence within the armed forces and facilitates international recognition of military qualifications. As the global security landscape evolves, SQF MILOF remains essential for ensuring that military officers are well-prepared and adaptable, capable of addressing the diverse challenges and responsibilities they encounter in their service to their respective nations and the global community.

4. Discussion

The EQF unites the national qualification frameworks of different countries around a common European benchmark – the eight reference levels (European Union 2023). These include a full range of qualifications – from foundation level (level 1, eg. Leaving Certificates) to advanced levels (level 8, eg. PhD).

As a tool for the lifelong learning specialty, the both (Bulgarian and European) frameworks include all qualification levels acquired within general, vocational as well as academic education and training. In addition, they also include qualifications acquired within initial and continuing education and training.

The eight reference levels are described through learning outcomes for the purposes of creating opportunities for comparisons and cooperation between countries and institutions. The learning outcomes are defined as indicators of what the learner knows, understands and can do at the end of the learning process. The learning outcomes are specifically described in three categories – knowledge, skills and competences. This shows that qualifications - in different combinations - cover a wide range of learning outcomes, including theoretical

knowledge, practical experience and technical skills, as well as social competence, with the ability to work together playing a leading role.

Using learning outcomes as a common reference point, the frameworks facilitate comparisons and transfer of qualifications across countries, systems and institutions and have practical applicability to a wide range of users, both at European and national level.

The learning outcomes in the three qualifications framework are defined in terms of:

Knowledge: is described as theoretical and/or factual.

Skills: are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).

Responsibility and autonomy: is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility.

For the purpose of the qualification frameworks common definitions of the terms: “Qualification”, “Learning outcomes”, “Credit for learning outcomes”, “Recognition of learning outcomes” are adopted. The common understanding of the fundamental terms gives direct referencing links between European and Bulgarian qualification networks. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian National referencing report is not yet endorsed by the EQF Advisory Group the analysis made here confirms that Bulgarian NQF satisfies the referencing criteria and clear and transparent relationship between the national qualification levels and the eight EQF levels is established.

As a difference between EQF and Bulgarian NQF could be outlined much more detailed descriptions of learning outcomes in NQF, comparing with the more generic wording in EQF. NQF also defines level 0 but it has not equality in the EQF and does not concern SQF MILOF.

In the context of NQFs, quality assurance has been defined as the ‘Processes and procedures for ensuring that qualifications, assessment and program delivery meet certain standards’ (Tuck 2007). The EQF is described in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017, Annex IV (Council of the European Union 2017) of which sets out the ten principles for qualifications covered by NQFs or systems referenced to the EQF.

It is recommended that all qualifications at EQF level be quality assured to enhance trust in their quality and level. In accordance with national circumstances, and taking into account sectoral differences, quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should:

1. address the design of qualifications and application of the learning outcomes approach;

2. ensure valid and reliable assessment in line with agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards and address the process of certification;
3. consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;
4. involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;
5. be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;
6. be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;
7. be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;
8. be supported by appropriate resources;
9. include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies, carrying out quality assurance;
10. include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results.

These common principles are fully compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and with European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET).

EU members, in their pursuit of developing interoperable forces and professional military personnel based on similar training and qualifications, are interested in education and training programs that define similar learning outcomes. However, the mere existence of these programs is not sufficient unless there is trust in the quality of their products. When it comes to the quality of education and training, international and European quality standards (European Commission 2009, European Union – Equip project 2015) are the recognized criteria against which institutions demonstrate the value and consistency of their efforts.

As is the case for the EQF, SQF-MILOF is a meta-framework that does not dictate the standards to which EU members should educate and train their personnel. SQF-MILOF is an inclusive platform that helps individual countries to visualize the pan-European spectrum of learning for the profession of military officer. A secondary objective of SQF-MILOF is to facilitate mobility through exchanges of officers at all levels of a military career; hence the need for transparent and quality-assured programs offered for this purpose.

The analysis of the EU member states description of their quality-assured military qualifications shows compliance with the principles set out in the EQF (European parliament/Council 2009). Military education institutes in the countries follow the quality principles used in higher education. These are aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (Fig. 1) in the European Higher Education Area.

Therefore, the SQF-MILOF working group has recommended that member states that assign a SQF-MILOF level to their National Military Qualifications (NMQs) ensure that those qualifications comply with the quality assurance principles defined by the EQF (Annex IV), described above (European Security and Defence College 2020).



Figure 3. NMQ follow the EQF and SQF-MILOF quality assurance principles

5. Conclusion

SQF-MILOF is in line with the Bulgarian NQF because:

- There is a horizontal link between the classified Bulgarian national qualifications and the SQF-MILOF level descriptors.
- The Bulgarian national qualification is based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and is related to credit system (European Union 2005).
- of the transparency of the procedures for the inclusion of qualifications in the SQF-MILOF.
- The Bulgarian NMQ levelled to SQF-MILOF is quality assured in accordance with the principles specified in Annex IV of the EQF.

The proofed relation can be further on elaborated through establishment of national sectoral qualifications policy (for the military sector) applicable for the qualifications requirements for the officer's positions in the Arm forces. This qualification requirement in the job descriptions can be used for supporting the lifelong learning policy. Qualification and educational courses have to be adjusted (or developed) to cover the already fixed qualifications.

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