



The recommendations on short-cycle qualifications in higher education

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Summary of recommendations

Following the results of survey and discussions among the QUATRA – TPG A Working Group on SCQ, the recommendations were prepared. The major points of recommendations on the short-cycle qualifications are outlined below; their order is not intentional.

- **Access to short-cycle studies**
The countries considering the introduction of short-cycle qualifications need to set appropriate entry requirements, i.e., secondary education qualifications that provide access to higher education in the country in question.
- **Duration and/or volume of study programmes (e.g., ECTS credits)**
Volume of short-cycle study programmes should be expressed in ECTS credits. Countries, introducing or developing the short-cycle qualifications should follow the provisions of the Paris Communiqué that the short-cycle qualifications comprise 90-120 ECTS credits.
- **Access to further studies (i.e., existing bridges to Bachelor's studies)**
The countries planning to introduce short-cycle qualifications should ensure strong pathways to further higher education, especially to first-cycle studies, including validation practices, exemptions and credit transfers.
- **EQF or QF-EHEA level**
QF level of short-cycle qualifications should correspond to EQF level 5 or QF-EHEA short-cycle to ensure their comparability and international recognition.
- **Quality assurance according to the principles of ESG**
Higher education quality assurance procedures and ESG principles should apply to short-cycle qualifications.
- **Differentiation between short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials**
When introducing short-cycle qualifications, the state should clearly define short-cycle qualifications to distinguish them from micro-credentials and/or smaller learning experiences.
- **Recognition of the short-cycle qualifications**
Countries planning to introduce short-cycle qualifications should comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) and its subsidiary texts, to ensure fair recognition of short-cycle qualifications.
- **Automatic recognition**
The possibility of applying automatic recognition for short cycle qualifications should be further explored.



List of abbreviations

- ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
- EHEA – European Higher Education Area
- EQF – European Qualifications Framework
- ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education
- HE – higher education
- HEI – higher education institution
- NQF – National Qualifications Framework
- QF – Qualifications Framework
- QF-EHEA – Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area
- QUATRA – TPG A – Qualifications Frameworks for trust, transparency and diversity – TPG A
- TPG A – EHEA Thematic Peer Group A on Qualification Frameworks
- SCQ – short-cycle qualification
- VET – vocational education and training



Introduction

From almost the beginning of Bologna Process, in Berlin in 2003 the Ministers invited the Bologna Follow-up Group to explore whether and how a shorter higher education may be linked to the first cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). After almost 10 years, in Bucharest in 2012 the Ministers decided to explore how the QF-EHEA could take into account the short-cycle qualifications (EQF level 5) and encourage countries to use the QF-EHEA for referencing these qualifications in national contexts where they exist and ensuring that qualifications frameworks work in practice, emphasising their link to learning outcomes. Furthermore, possibilities for the QF-EHEA to consider the short cycle qualifications in national systems should be explored.

The commitments of the Yerevan Communiqué (2015) invited the countries to include short-cycle qualifications in the overarching QF-EHEA, based on the Dublin descriptors for short-cycle qualifications and quality assured according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), so as to make provisions for the recognition of short-cycle qualifications in their own systems, also where they do not comprise such qualifications.

At policy level, the short-cycle qualifications were initially stated as a stand-alone qualification within the QF-EHEA by the Paris Communiqué (25.05.2018), which is the latest communique focusing on the short cycle. The Communiqué noted that in many of HE systems, ECTS-based short-cycle qualifications play an increasingly important role in preparing students for employment and further studies, as well as in improving social cohesion by facilitating access for many who would otherwise not have considered higher education. Therefore, the document stressed that each country may decide whether and how to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework.

According to the Appendix III of the Paris Communiqué (adopted on 25.05.2018), the revised QF-EHEA Area “comprises the short cycle, the first cycle, the second cycle and the third cycle generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the short cycle, first and second cycles”. Although the ministers admitted “that each country decides whether and how to incorporate short-cycle qualifications within its own national framework, the **Paris Communiqué underlined the role ECTS-based short-cycle qualifications play in preparing students for employment and further studies as well as in improving social cohesion**”.

The Paris Communiqué proposes the following structure for the short-cycle qualifications:

Learning outcomes	ECTS credits
<p>Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short-cycle are awarded to students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle; • can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts; • have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems; 	<p>Typically include 90-120 ECTS credits</p>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;• have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy. | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

Thus, the policy document clearly conceptualises that short-cycles are stand-alone higher education qualifications with a double purpose – preparation for labour market **and** further HE studies (in the first cycle). Similarly, the ISCED 2011 Manual (see paragraph 207) states that the education programmes at ISCED level 5, or short-cycle tertiary education, are often designed to provide participants with professional knowledge, skills and competences. Typically, the programmes are practically based, occupationally-specific and prepare students to enter the labour market. However, these programmes may also provide a pathway to other tertiary education programmes. Academic tertiary education programmes below the level of a Bachelor’s programme or equivalent are also classified as ISCED level 5.

The Paris Communiqué has stated that first cycle qualifications usually comprise 180-240 ECTS credits, i.e., they are evidently qualifications of greater volume than short-cycle, while both first cycle and short-cycle build upon the “general secondary education”.

According to Eurostat statistics (Statistics | Eurostat, europa.eu), in 2021, in total 1,442,065 students (i.e., 7.74% of all the 18,629,000 students studying in HE programmes) were enrolled in short-cycle programmes in the EU-27 countries. Out of 27 EU countries, 6 countries did not have short-cycle qualifications (BG, EE, FI, GR, LT, RO). However, the highest number of students having enrolled in short-cycle programmes in 2021 was in France (565,733 students which is 20% of individuals studying in all HE programmes), in Spain (524,257 students or 23% of individuals studying in all HE programmes), and Austria following with 74,059 students which is 17% of individuals studying in all HE programmes. In 2021, in several EU countries the number of students choosing short-cycle programmes ranged from 10,000 to 40,000 – 40,968 in Sweden, 35,666 in Denmark, 33,785 in The Netherlands, 25,088 in Belgium, 23,134 in Italy, 22,715 in Ireland, 18,127 in Portugal, 14,130 in Latvia, 11,834 in Hungary, 10,989 in Germany and 10,564 in Slovenia. The rest of the countries had less than 10,000 students studying short-cycle programmes in 2021, for example, 3792 learners in Cyprus, 2389 in Malta, 2387 in Slovakia, 1048 in Czech Republic, 880 in Luxembourg, 508 in Poland and only 12 in Croatia. Thus, short-cycle students may be considered as a considerable part of HE community although their proportion is comparatively small.

The introduction or development of short-cycle qualifications as stand-alone qualifications as integral part of QF in HE seems to be essential to facilitate objectives of EHEA. With its double purpose – further HE studies and labour market – the short-cycle qualifications facilitate availability of HE to a wider range of social groups, promoting their lifelong learning and combating socioeconomic exclusion.

In order to provide support for the countries which consider introducing or developing short-cycle qualifications as a part of their QF of higher education, the project QUATRA – TPG A Working Group on Short-Cycle Qualifications in HE has elaborated the recommendations. This document may be used as a reference by the authorities and other stakeholders involved in the development of QF of higher education in the country to ensure that the new (or reformed) qualifications correspond to the objectives of EHEA and are transparent, comparable and recognised both for further HE studies and employment.



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The recommendations consist of four sections:

- Main conclusions from the survey of TPG A member countries;
- General characterisation of short-cycle qualifications in higher education;
- Recognition of short-cycle qualifications in higher education;
- Possibilities to refer short-cycle qualifications in various national higher education systems to the principles of the Paris Communiqué.

These sections were included in the document by the agreement among the members of the working group, as these explore various aspects and together provides holistic illustration of the short-cycle qualifications to be taken into account when introducing them with a special focus on the context of qualifications frameworks.



1. The main conclusions of the survey on the state of play regarding short-cycle qualifications in higher education in TPG A member countries

As a part of working group on short-cycle qualifications activities, a survey was designed to explore the situation regarding short-cycle qualifications in higher education in TPG A member countries. The results of the survey were expected to provide foundation for developing these recommendations if any country decides to include or develop short-cycle qualifications in their QFs of higher education.

In December 2022 the working group created a questionnaire (fiche) both for those countries that have short-cycle qualifications and which do not (see Annex 1). The countries who have these qualifications were asked to characterise them, other respondent countries could discuss their further plans. Detailed results of the survey are outlined in the Annex 2.

From 27 TPG A member countries, 20 countries participated in the survey – Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium Flanders, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, San Marino.

The following main conclusions of the survey were drawn:

- Majority of the countries which do not have short-cycle qualifications are not planning to introduce them, they provide a range of VET qualifications on EQF level 5 instead;
- The countries that have short-cycle qualifications in HE use different terms to entitle these qualifications;
- Duration and ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle qualifications also vary by country; however, one standard is used – 60 ECTS credits per year;
- In majority of countries, short-cycle qualifications are recognised by labour market and QA criteria correspond to the ESG principles; thus, these qualifications are considered as part of HE sector;
- The most common fields of ISCED in which short-cycle qualifications are available in are business and administration, engineering and information technologies;
- The introduction of short-cycle qualifications in countries where they do not exist should be based on a clear demand of the stakeholders for such studies and qualifications and transparent further pathways should be provided for the graduates.

Although when analysing the results of data, quantitative reflection was provided the fact of changing education systems should be emphasised. The respondent countries are in the course of reforms; therefore, described situation in the context of short-cycle qualifications is not solid.

2. The general characterisation of short-cycle qualifications in higher education

2.1. The purpose of short-cycle qualifications in higher education

The short-cycle qualifications in higher education are designed not only to develop learners' professional knowledge, skills and competences to facilitate their entering labour market in a briefer period of time than bachelor studies, but also equip them with sufficient autonomy to continue further higher education studies.

Thus, countries that intend introducing the short-cycle qualifications in HE should **consider the twofold purpose of these qualifications** – on one hand, ensuring labour market oriented learning outcomes and, on other hand, providing future pathways for HE studies.

A point for discussion is differentiation between short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials whether these types of qualifications may be the same in terms of the purpose. Although both short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials are full qualifications designed to provide learners with professional knowledge, skills and competences, short-cycle qualifications are more focused on facilitating entrance into the labour market and career advancement while micro-credentials are more focused on personal and professional development. Furthermore, the short-cycles qualifications as defined by the Paris Communiqué are part of the overarching QF-EHEA, while micro-credentials may represent various education sectors and their inclusion in a qualifications framework remains under the decision of the countries.

Therefore, the countries considering the introduction or reforming implementation of either type of the mentioned qualifications should **take into account the differences in the purpose** of them in order to facilitate the transparency and comparability of their qualifications.

2.2. The features of short-cycle qualifications in higher education

In order to analyse and provide recommendations about the main characteristics of the short-cycle qualifications, as main evidence the results of the survey on situation regarding short-cycle qualifications in higher education in TPG A member countries were used.

First, the short-cycle qualifications as defined by their title are of **smaller volume** than the first cycle qualifications. According to the Paris Communiqué, the short-cycle qualifications typically include 90-120 ECTS credits, while the first cycle qualifications – 180-240 ECTS credits. The results of survey reveal variety of respondent countries' approaches towards volume of short cycle qualifications – from 30 to 180 ECTS credits. The duration of study programmes may depend on the previous education and sector. Yet all the respondent countries mentioned that 60 ECTS credits are allocated for one study year.

When considering the volume of short-cycle qualifications, they may be compared with micro-credentials. However, the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (16.06.2022) does not stipulate particular amount of ECTS credits for micro-credentials or small learning experiences leaving this feature to be defined by the Member Countries or providers.

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To summarise, the **volume of the short-cycle qualifications should be regarded in the context of the relevant HE system** and framework in order to ensure clear pathways for learners and comparability of qualifications of various types and levels. The short-cycle qualifications may not be of greater volume than first cycle qualifications in the particular national system and they should be of greater volume than potential smaller learning experiences. However, taking into account the existing variety of volume of short-cycle qualifications, to facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications, other features (apart from volume) should clearly identify short-cycle qualifications as this type of qualifications to differentiate them from smaller learning experiences.

Second, the **EQF or QF-EHEA level** of short-cycle qualifications should be considered as one of the main features. The results of survey clearly highlighted that all the respondent countries have allocated EQF level 5 or QF-EHEA short-cycle to the mentioned qualifications.

Therefore, the countries wishing to introduce short-cycle qualifications as part of their qualifications framework of higher education should **consider allocating EQF level 5** to these qualifications in order to facilitate transparency and international comparability of their qualifications.

Third, a significant feature of a qualification is **admission requirements**, which seem to be reflected on in the Paris Communiqué (25.05.2018) stating that the short-cycle qualification “builds upon general secondary education”. In the most respondent countries of survey, secondary education qualification is set as requirement to be eligible for admission to short-cycle studies. This feature is similar to the first cycle qualifications (as defined by the Paris Communiqué), yet may be of great variety comparing to micro-credentials; thus, admission requirements are important to identify certain types of qualifications.

The countries considering implementation of short-cycle qualifications should stipulate adequate admission requirements, i.e., **secondary education qualifications that provide access rights to higher education in the particular country**.

Fourth, the next feature of qualification to be described is its provided **access to further HE studies and labour market**. The results of the survey highlight that in a vast majority of respondent countries the graduates of short-cycle programmes have access to both further studies and labour market. Hence, the potential further pathways of the graduates reflect the above-mentioned twofold purpose of the short-cycle qualifications.

Comparing various types of qualifications in terms of this aspect, the first cycle qualification ensures access to the second cycle qualification and labour market. While micro-credentials may provide a large range of possibilities that should be clearly communicated for the learners to make considerate decisions.

Therefore, the countries planning to introduce the short-cycle qualifications should consider ensuring **strong pathways to further higher education studies** especially to the first cycle studies including validation practices, exemptions and transfer of credits. The graduates of short-cycle qualifications should have an easier access to the first cycle studies. This approach would facilitate added value to the short cycle qualifications and promote its deeper integration in the qualifications framework of HE as a stand-alone HE qualification.

Fifth, the **target audience** of the short-cycle qualifications should be explored as a feature. According to the results of the survey, in most cases the target audience of the short-cycle qualifications is both adults and young people. This feature again illustrates the twofold nature of the short-cycle

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qualifications – both flexible qualifications corresponding to labour market needs and qualifications including scientific/research elements relevant to HE qualifications.

The countries willing to implement the short-cycle qualifications should take into consideration that these qualifications should be targeted both at **young people just graduated from secondary education and adults with previous work and education experience**. This aspect requires additional attention of the providers to adopt the programmes to the needs of varied audiences.

2.3. The functions of short-cycle qualifications in higher education

The functions of the short-cycle qualifications emerge from the purpose of these qualifications. The initial function of the short-cycle qualifications is **ensuring more flexible HE pathways that are more responsive to the labour market needs** in comparison to the first cycle. Thus, the short-cycle qualifications should reflect the needs of employers who should take more active role in the elaboration of these qualifications.

Furthermore, the professional knowledge, skills and competences that should be acquired or developed by the learners of short cycle studies are more advanced compared to EQF level 4 VET qualifications. Thus, the short-cycle qualifications should **provide more specific links or bridges between VET sector and HE sector** within a certain economic field in the particular countries. Considering the fact that frequently VET graduates in practice have limited access to HE studies or are in a disadvantaged position comparing to general education graduates, the short-cycle qualifications should facilitate more open and easier transfer between both education sectors. In addition, the cooperation between VET institutions and HEIs would facilitate lifelong learning and professional development opportunities attracting more learners to both education sectors.

Taking into account that short-cycle studies often selected by adult learners as a pathway for a **further professional development**, the short-cycle qualifications should reflect the needs and interests of this target group comprising adequate teaching, learning and assessment methods and learning outcomes. This may be considered as one of the challenges for HEIs who have to focus on various target groups when planning and implementing short-cycle qualifications.

As higher education qualifications, the short-term qualifications in addition to above mentioned functions have to comprise the **scientific and research elements** characteristic to HE studies; however, with a greater focus on **applied research** comparing to other cycle studies. These elements are significant to ensure consequent transfer of graduates to Bachelor's studies. The learners need to acquire academic and general knowledge, skills and competences to be able to conduct research in their field.

3. The recognition of short-cycle qualifications in higher education

Regarding the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (26.11.2018), in order to facilitate transparency and support trust between EHEA higher education systems, which would lead to automatic mutual recognition for the purpose of further learning, the Member Countries have agreed that “higher education systems are organised in line with Bologna Process structures and principles, comprising a three-cycle framework and, where applicable to the Member State, a short cycle as defined in the qualification framework of the European Higher Education Area”.

According to the results of survey, the issue of recognition of short-cycle qualifications causes the most ambiguities, as in some respondent countries the short-cycle qualifications do not exist and no procedures of recognition have been introduced.

Therefore, some **guiding principles of internal recognition** (within the national system) for the countries intending to introduce or reinforce the short-cycle qualifications should be elaborated. Meanwhile, the **guiding principles of international recognition** should be established with the reference to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997) and its subsidiary documents. The recognition should be considered in the context of academic recognition (for further studies) and professional recognition (for entering or exceeding in labour market) in order to ensure fair evaluation for all the graduates of the short-cycle programmes. The use of common approaches to recognition is essential not only to facilitate mobility of learners and transparency and comparability of qualifications, but also to provide added value of the short-cycle qualifications. The other important set of references is the Bologna Process tools (NQF, Diploma Supplement, learning outcomes, ECTS credits, quality assurance), which are considered during the recognition.

3.1. Recognition for further studies (existing pathways)

The results of the survey did not provide sufficient data about the existing practices in the TPG A member countries in the terms of recognition for further studies. Although the short-cycle has been stated as a stand-alone qualification with a separate QF level, as regards learning outcomes the short cycle may be treated as a part (although independent) of first cycle studies; thus, ensuring some easier procedures for transfer between short cycle and first cycle have to be established within the country.

The countries may have various approaches to pathways and learning routes in the context of their national education policy and traditions, as well as requirements of stakeholders and needs of learners.

However, following the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary documents, some aspects should be considered to ensure equal access to further higher education studies by the holders of short-cycle qualification. The subsidiary document – Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (June 2013) states that qualifications frameworks should be used while considering the five key elements in recognition: level, learning outcomes, quality, workload and profile.

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Hence, the following features of the short-cycle qualifications should be addressed:

- Access to short-cycle should be to the holders of qualifications that provide access to HE (i.e., both general and VET secondary education qualifications);
- Duration and/or volume of the short cycle studies (e.g., ECTS credits) should be harmonised within the country;
- Duration and/or volume (e.g., ECTS credits) of the short cycle studies should be shorter and/or smaller than the Bachelor studies;
- QF level of short-cycle qualifications should correspond to EQF level 5 or QF-EHEA short-cycle;
- Further learning pathways should be clearly formulated according to national approaches to regulative framework including transfer of credits and exemptions of study periods to shorten further first cycle studies.
- Short-cycle qualifications should be based on learning outcomes as stated by the Paris Communiqué (25.05.2018)
- Quality assurance procedures and principles of ESG should be referred to short-cycle qualifications, i.e., the same quality assurance procedures and criteria as applied for other HE qualifications in the particular national system.

3.2. Recognition for labour market

Taking into account that the short-cycle qualifications should comprise professional knowledge, skills and competences relevant to the labour market needs, the graduates' access to labour market should be clearly defined.

The results of the survey show that in most cases in the respondent countries short-cycle qualifications are recognised by labour market. However, the survey did not explore whether the graduates have easier access to the jobs in the particular economic sector relevant to their qualification.

Stakeholders should be involved in the planning and implementation of short-cycle qualifications to foster their relevance to the labour market. Furthermore, in this context the significance of sectoral qualifications frameworks and bodies should be taken into account when introducing short-cycle qualifications in HE system.

4. Possibilities to refer short-cycle qualifications in various national higher education systems to the principles of Paris Communiqué

Following the agreement at national level about the essential features of the short-cycle qualifications, possibilities to harmonise the short-cycle qualifications between different countries should be explored. This step is part of higher education policy priorities leading to EHEA ensuring comparability and transparency of qualifications across borders and facilitating international mobility of learners and citizens.

The succeeding elements of the short-cycle qualifications should be considered:

- **Access to short-cycle studies**

Paris Communiqué (25.05.2018) states that the short-cycle qualification “builds upon general secondary education”. In the most respondent countries of survey, secondary education qualification is set as a requirement to be eligible for admission to short-cycle studies.

The countries considering implementation of short-cycle qualifications should stipulate adequate admission requirements, i.e., secondary education qualifications that provide access rights to higher education in the particular country.

- **Duration and/or volume of study programmes (e.g., ECTS credits)**

Volume of short-cycle study programmes should be expressed in ECTS credits. The results of the survey show that duration and ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle qualifications also vary by country – from 30 to 180 ECTS credits; however, one standard is used – 60 ECTS credits per year. The duration of study programmes may depend on the previous education and sector. According to the Paris Communiqué, the short-cycle qualifications typically include 90-120 ECTS credits, while the first cycle qualifications – 180-240 ECTS credits. Therefore, the principle should be followed that the short-cycle qualifications as defined by their title are of smaller volume than the first cycle qualifications. Countries, introducing or developing the short-cycle qualifications should follow the Paris Communiqué suggestions that the short-cycle qualifications include 90-120 ECTS credits.

- **Access to further studies (i.e., existing bridges to Bachelor’s studies)**

The countries planning to introduce the short-cycle qualifications should consider ensuring strong pathways to further higher education studies, especially to the first cycle studies including validation practices, exemptions and transfer of credits. The graduates of short-cycle qualifications should have an easier access to the first cycle studies. This approach would facilitate added value to the short cycle qualifications and promote its deeper integration in the qualifications framework of HE as a stand-alone HE qualification.

- **EQF or QF-EHEA level**

QF level of short-cycle qualifications should correspond to EQF level 5 or QF-EHEA short-cycle to ensure their comparability and international recognition. The EQF or QF-EHEA level of short-cycle qualifications should be considered as one of the main features; therefore, diplomas of the short-cycle qualifications should include a diploma supplement with clearly indicated EQF or QF-EHEA level.

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- **Quality assurance according to the principles of ESG**

Quality assurance procedures and principles of ESG should be referred to the short-cycle qualifications, i.e., the same quality assurance procedures and criteria as applied for other HE qualifications in the particular national system. The quality assurance processes of the short-cycle qualifications should be managed by a quality assurance agency included in the EQAR.

- **Differentiation between short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials**

Both short-cycle qualifications and micro-credentials are full qualifications designed to provide learners with professional knowledge, skills and competences; however, the short-cycle qualifications are more focused on facilitating entry into the labour market while micro-credentials are more focused on personal and professional development. Furthermore, the short-cycle qualifications as defined by the Paris Communiqué are part of the overarching QF-EHEA, while micro-credentials may represent various education sectors and their inclusion in a qualifications framework remains under the decision of the countries. When introducing the short-cycle qualifications, the country should clearly identify short-cycle qualifications to differentiate them from micro-credentials and smaller learning experiences.

- **Recognition of the short-cycle qualifications**

In some countries the short-cycle qualifications do not exist and no procedures of recognition of such qualifications have been introduced. The recognition should be considered in the context of academic recognition (for further studies) and professional recognition (for entering or exceeding in labour market) in order to ensure fair recognition for all the graduates of the short-cycle programmes. The countries should follow the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) and its subsidiary documents providing fair recognition of short-cycle qualifications.

- **Automatic recognition**

Considering that short cycle qualifications are higher education qualifications and must be subject to automatic recognition, the possibility of applying automatic recognition for short cycle qualifications should be further explored.

Annex 1. Template of the fiche on short-cycle qualifications for HE

Country	
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Introduction questions

<p>What qualifications (higher education or VET) are placed on EQF level 5 in your country?</p> <p><i>Please provide list of titles in English and national language(s).</i></p>	
<p><u>If you do not have short-cycle qualifications in your country, are you planning to introduce them?</u></p> <p><i>Yes/No</i></p>	
<p>If you do not have short-cycle qualifications in your country, how do you ensure recognition of EQF level 5 qualifications?</p> <p><i>Please provide short description of procedures (max.1 page).</i></p>	

Questions for those countries that have HE qualifications on EQF level 5

<p>Title of short-cycle qualification</p> <p><i>Please provide the title(s) in English and in national language(s) as written on diploma/certificate</i></p>	
<p>Duration and ECTS</p> <p><i>Please provide information about volume of full-time studies expressed in years and ECTS credits (if there are ECTS)</i></p>	
<p>EQF/QF-EHEA level</p>	
<p>Admission requirements</p>	

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<p>Access to further studies and labour market</p>	
<p>Target audience <i>Please describe who are main learners, e.g., adults, young people</i></p>	
<p>Recognition <i>Please describe whether the qualifications are recognised by labour market, if they lead to regulated professions</i></p>	
<p>Quality assurance and accreditation <i>Please describe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>whether the qualifications are included in the HE quality assurance procedures,</i> • <i>whether quality assurance of these qualifications refer to the ESG principles</i> 	
<p>Main areas/fields of ISCED <i>Please name only the main fields of ISCED¹, in which qualifications are available) if possible. Please state if there is another classification in use in your country</i></p>	
<p>Any other comments</p>	

¹ Guide of ISCED classification is here: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-fields-of-education-and-training-2013-detailed-field-descriptions-2015-en.pdf>.

Annex 2. Results of the survey on situation regarding short-cycle qualifications in higher education in TPG A member countries

The purpose of the survey was to explore the situation regarding short-cycle qualifications in higher education in TPG A member countries to provide foundation for developing the recommendations on inclusion of short-cycle qualifications in higher education if the member countries decide to take such steps. Therefore, in December 2022 the working group created a questionnaire (fiche) with three introducing questions for all respondent countries and nine detailed questions for the countries which have introduced short-cycle qualifications in higher education. The introducing questions focused on identifying the qualifications placed on the EQF level 5, clarifying future plans of the respondent countries (if they do not have short-cycle qualifications) whether they intended to introduce such qualifications, as well as how recognition of EQF level 5 qualifications was ensured. The content related nine questions aimed to explore features of the short-cycle qualifications provided in the respondent countries in order to state similarities and differences between the approaches of respondent countries.

The fiche was sent to all the TPG A member countries (in total 27 countries). Twenty countries participated in the survey (deadline for submission 13 January 2023) – Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium Flanders, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, San Marino.

Initially the survey explored **whether the participating countries have short-cycle qualifications in higher education**. The results show that 11 countries have short-cycle qualifications in higher education and nine countries – do not have such qualifications. Thus, the working group had a possibility to get acquainted with comparatively large experience of countries.

Previous studies, e.g., Cedefop's study of 2014², show that EQF level 5 includes variety of qualifications representing both higher education and VET; therefore, the next question aimed to identify **what qualifications (higher education or VET) were placed on EQF level 5** in the respondent countries. The replies illustrate the differences between the national systems. According to the results of survey, four countries (AD, BE-FL, CY, NL) have only higher education qualifications on EQF level 5, seven (AM, AT, AZ, BG, DE, EE, GR, RO) – VET qualifications and seven (LV, HR, MT, MK, HU, AL, PL) – qualifications from both education sectors. One country (SM) does not have any qualifications on this EQF level. In the case of LV VET qualifications on EQF level 5 were introduced in the law in October 2022, but they are not available yet for the implementation and there are no graduates with such qualifications. Some examples of EQF level 5 qualifications are summarised in table 1 below.

² Cedefop (2014). Qualifications at level 5: progressing in a career or to higher education. Working Paper No 23. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/6123_en.pdf.

Table 1. Examples of HE and VET qualifications placed on EQF level 5

Country	Qualifications placed on EQF level 5
Albania	VET: Professional Certificate (<i>Certifikatë Profesionale</i>) issued at the end of post-secondary VET (Albanian Qualification Framework (AQF) level 5), HE: Professional Certificate (<i>Certifikatë Profesionale</i>), issued at the end of study programmes with a professional typology, duration 1 year (60 ECTS credits), short-cycle of higher education (AQF level 5), HE: Professional Diploma (<i>Diplomë Profesionale</i>) issued at the end of study programmes with a professional typology, duration 2 years (120 ECTS credits), short-cycle of higher education (AQF level 5).
Andorra	HE: Professional advanced diploma (<i>Diploma professional avançat</i>)
Armenia	VET: Diploma on Middle Professional Vocational Education with the level of qualification “Specialist”
Belgium – Flanders	HE: Associate degrees (<i>Graduaatsopleidingen – hoger beroepsonderwijs</i>)
Bulgaria	VET: the highest level of 4 th degree
Cyprus	5a Post-Secondary Certificates and Diplomas (1 year) (<i>Πιστοποιητικό (1 χρόνο)</i>), 5b Post-Secondary Certificates and Diplomas (2 years) (<i>Δίπλωμα (2 χρόνια)</i>), 5c Higher Certificates and Diplomas (3 years) (<i>Ανώτερο Δίπλωμα (3 χρόνια)</i>)
Hungary	HE: higher education vocational qualification (<i>Felsőoktatási szakképzettség</i>), VET: Advanced-level vocational qualification (full, add-on, technician) (<i>Emelt szintű szakképesítés, szakképesítés-ráépülés, technikus szakképzettség</i>)
Latvia	<i>Until 11.10.2022</i> HE: Diploma of first level professional higher education (<i>Pirmā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms</i>) <i>From 11.10.2022</i> HE: Diploma of short-cycle professional higher education (short-cycle professional higher education) (<i>Īsā cikla profesionālās augstākās izglītības un profesionālās kvalifikācijas diploms (īsā cikla profesionālās augstākās izglītība)</i>), VET: Certificate of professional qualification (<i>profesionālās kvalifikācijas apliecība</i>)
Malta	Undergraduate Higher Diploma, Undergraduate Diploma, Undergraduate Certificate, VET Level 5 programme
Poland	HE: Certified specialist (<i>specjalista dyplomowany</i>), HE: Certified specialist, technologist (<i>specjalista dyplomowany technolog</i>)
The Netherlands	Associate Degrees programmes (120 ECTS credits)

The next question clarified **the plans of those respondent countries** which do not have short-cycle qualifications whether they intended to introduce such qualifications. The findings on the countries' plans of introducing short-cycle qualifications show that four countries (AL, AZ, GR, RO) are planning to introduce them, seven countries (AM, AT, BG, DE, EE, MK, SM) are not planning to introduce short-cycle qualifications and to nine countries this question is not applicable.

The last introducing question focused on **recognition practices of EQF level 5 qualifications** in those respondent countries which do not have short-cycle qualifications. The results of the survey indicate that recognition of EQF level 5 qualifications in two countries (AM, SM) is assured by accreditation process. This question was not applicable to thirteen countries; however, five countries' responses are varied. See examples of recognition of EQF level 5 qualifications summarised in table 2.

Table 2. Examples of recognition practices of EQF level 5 qualifications from the countries that do not have short-cycle qualifications

Country	Quotes from the survey
Austria	The colleges for higher vocational education are levelled on NQF level 5. With the respective school leaving certification, one can enrol higher education. Entrance requirements for higher education studies lay in the autonomy of the respective higher education institution.
Bulgaria	It [level 5 qualification] is not considered as part of the higher education system or recognised as a period of training.
Estonia	Estonia does not recognise level 5 qualifications as short-cycle qualifications in higher education, but level 5 higher education qualification can be recognised as part of higher education studies under the conditions and procedures set by the higher education institution. For example, studies can be transferred to complete a bachelor or professional higher education programme.
Germany	The descriptors for level 5 as the basis for recognition are defined in the German QF.
San Marino	Level 5 qualification can be obtained via accreditation of prior working experiences.

The subsequent questions of the survey were responded by the countries which have short-cycle qualifications in higher education, namely, 11 countries (AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HR, HU, LV, MK, MT, NL, PL). The respondents had to provide information about various features of their short-cycle qualifications in higher education.

Title of short-cycle qualification

According to the results of the survey, two countries (BE-FL, NL) entitle short-cycle qualification as Associate Degree and eight countries have various entitlements (see the examples in table 3), however, to two countries this question was not applicable.

Table 3. Examples of titles of short-cycle qualifications

Country	Examples (quotes from the survey)
Andorra	Professional advanced diploma (<i>Diploma professional avançat</i>)
Albania	Professional Certificate (<i>Certifikatë Profesionale</i>), Professional Diploma (<i>Diplomë Profesionale</i>)
Belgium-Flanders	Associate degree (<i>Gegradueerde</i>)
Croatia	Upon completion of the professional short study (<i>stručni kratki studij</i>), the student acquires a certificate and the professional title “ <i>pristupnik</i> ” with an indication of profession
Cyprus	5a Certificate (1 year) (<i>Πιστοποιητικό (1 χρόνο)</i>), 5b Diploma (2 years) (<i>Δίπλωμα (2 χρόνια)</i>), 5c Higher Diploma (3 years) (<i>Ανώτερο Δίπλωμα (3 χρόνια)</i>)
Latvia	Diploma of first level professional higher education (<i>Pirmā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības diploms</i>)
Malta	Undergraduate Higher Diploma, Undergraduate Diploma, Undergraduate Certificate
The Netherlands	Associate Degree
Poland	Certified specialist (<i>specjalista dyplomowany</i>), Certified specialist, technologist (<i>specjalista dyplomowany technolog</i>)

Duration and ECTS credits

Regarding the amount of ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle studies, the survey results illustrate that in three countries (AD, HR, HU) students are awarded at least 120 ECTS credits and in one country (NL) the volume of short-cycle HE studies is not more than 120 ECTS credits. However, in seven countries volume of ECTS credits varies from 30 ECTS credits in MT to 180 ECTS credits in CY and LV. The duration of programmes may depend on the previous education and sector. See number of ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle studies by country in table 4 below.

Table 4. Duration (years or semesters) and ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle studies by country

Country	ECTS credits (number of years/semesters)
Andorra	120 ECTS credits (4 semesters in 2 years)
Albania	60 ECTS credits (1 year) and 120 ECTS (2 years)
Belgium – Flanders	90 or 120 ECTS credits (1.5 or 2 years)

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Croatia	>120 ECTS credits (2 years)
Cyprus	60-180 ECTS credits (1-3 years)
Hungary	>120 ECTS credits (4 semesters)
Latvia	120-180 ECTS credits (2-3 years)
Malta	Undergraduate Higher Diploma – 90 ECTS credits, Undergraduate Diploma – 60 ECTS credits, Undergraduate Certificate – 30 ECTS credits
The Netherlands	120 ECTS credits (may be acquired fulltime, part-time or dual)
North Macedonia	60-120 ECTS credits
Poland	>90 ECTS credits (3 semesters)

EQF/QF-EHEA level

The presence of short-cycle programmes considered as part of higher education refers to situations where national qualifications frameworks and/or top-level steering documents recognise the short cycle (or short-cycle qualifications) as part of the higher education system (Bologna implementation report)

According to the survey, 11 respondent countries, which have short-cycle qualifications, confirmed that these qualifications were placed on EQF level 5 or QF-EHEA short-cycle.

Admission requirements

Analysing the replies to the question about admission requirements, the results of the survey show that in nine countries (AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HR, HU, LV, NL, PL) secondary education qualification is set as requirement to be eligible for admission to short-cycle studies. However, two countries (MK, MT) mentioned “education equivalent to level 4” as an admission requirement without specifying particular qualification.

Access to further studies and labour market

Regarding the future possibilities for the holders of short-cycle qualifications, the results highlight that in two countries (HR, PL) the graduates have access to further studies, in one country (MK) the graduates have access to labour market. However, a vast majority of seven respondent countries (AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HU, LV, NL) indicated that the graduates have access to both further studies and labour market. This question was not replied by one country (MT).

Target audience

According to the results of the survey, in most cases – eight countries (AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HU, LV, MT, NL) the target audience is both adults and young people. Yet in one respondent country (MK) short-cycle qualifications are more appreciated by adults. This question could not be clarified by three countries (AD, HR, PL).

Recognition

The results of the survey show that in most cases (nine countries – AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HU, LV, MK, MT, NL) short-cycle qualifications are recognized by labour market and only in one country

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(PL) these qualifications are not recognized due to the fact that they have been introduced recently. This question was not answered by one country taking into account the insufficient number of such qualifications (HR).

Quality assurance and accreditation

Regarding quality assurance and accreditation of short-cycle qualifications, the results of the survey confirm that in the greatest part of respondent countries quality assurance of EQF level 5 qualifications is arranged in terms of higher education QA procedures (nine countries – AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HR, HU, LV, MT, NL) and these procedures and criteria correspond to the ESG principles (eight countries – AD, AL, BE-FL, CY, HR, HU, LV, NL). Meanwhile, only three countries (PL, MK, MT) mentioned that various quality assurance procedures are provided for EQF level 5 qualifications, e.g., some internally arranged procedures in PL.

Main areas/fields of ISCED

The results of the survey reveal that short-cycle qualifications may represent various fields and sectors. As the most common fields of ISCED in which short-cycle qualifications are available in were mentioned:

- business and administration – mentioned by six countries (AL, BE-FL, CY, HU, LV, MT),
- engineering – mentioned by six countries (BE-FL, CY, HR, HU, LV, MT),
- Information and Communication Technologies – mentioned by six countries (AL, BE-FL, CY, HU, MT).

This question was not replied by one country (PL). See examples of main fields of ISCED summarised in table 5 below.

Table 5. Main fields of ISCED for short-cycle qualifications by country

Country	Main fields of ISCED
Albania	Services Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary ICT information and communication technology Business, administration and law
Andorra	0411 Accounting and taxation, Accounting
Belgium Flanders	Business and administration Engineering and engineering trades Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) Welfare
Croatia	0715 Mechanics and metal trades 0788 Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications involving engineering, manufacturing and construction
Cyprus	Administration and Law Services

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	Information and Communication Technologies Engineering Manufacturing and Construction
Hungary	02 Arts and Humanities 04 Business, Administration and Law 06 Information and Communication Technologies 07 Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction 08 Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary 09 Health and Welfare
Latvia	Business and administration Engineering and engineering trades Health Security services Personal services
Malta	00 – Generic programmes and qualifications 01 – Education 02 – Arts and humanities 03 – Social sciences, journalism and information 04 – Business, administration and law 05 – Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics 06 – Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) 07 – Engineering, manufacturing and construction 08 – Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary 09 – Health and welfare 10 – Services
North Macedonia	Existing level 5B qualifications belong to the fields: 1012, 0211, 0612, 0712, 0716. One 5A qualification related to NQF system trainers: 0031

Having gathered and analysed all the data given by counties, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- Majority of the countries which do not have short-cycle qualifications are not planning to introduce them, they provide a range of VET qualifications on EQF level 5 instead;
- The countries that have short-cycle qualifications in HE use different terms to entitle these qualifications;
- Duration and ECTS credits awarded for short-cycle qualifications also vary by country; however, one standard is used – 60 ECTS credits per year;
- In majority of countries, short-cycle qualifications are recognised by labour market and QA criteria correspond to the ESG principles;



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- The most common fields of ISCED in which short-cycle qualifications are available in are business and administration, engineering and information technologies;
- The introduction of short-cycle qualifications in countries where they do not exist should be based on a clear demand of the stakeholders for such studies and qualifications, i.e., transparent further pathways should be provided for the graduates.

Although when analysing the results of data, quantitative reflection was provided the fact of changing education systems should be emphasised. The respondent countries are in the course of reforms; therefore, described situation in the context of short-cycle qualifications is not solid.

