

## DEVELOPMENTS AND APPLICATIONS OF SECTORAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN BORDER AND COAST GUARDING COURSE DESIGN

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### **Abstract**

*The surge of developing Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and their use in vocational training for the past few years can be illustrated by a Frontex<sup>2</sup> initiative in the extensive area of border and coast guarding. The EU authorities have tried to promote and model a harmonised approach to course design and training based on the European Qualifications Framework and Bologna and Copenhagen processes, matching the developments in general education across Europe. The aim of this paper is to examine the particular case of Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Border and Coast Guarding, focusing on vocational specificities, recent developments and practical applications at the level of course design. The corpus of the analysis consists of a specific training program in course design developed by Frontex in the past 5 years. The content analysis focuses on two main tiers: recent developments in SQF course design and applications of SQF in border and coast guarding course design. Each of these levels has structural and functional features with direct and critical implications onto national law enforcement curricula and training programs design, such as consistent revision of job competences, recognition of non-formal and informal learning and national accreditation and validation processes of qualifications and border police training programmes.*

**Keywords:** SQF for BG; job competence profiles; learning outcomes; learning and assessment strategies; training curricula.

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### **1. Introduction**

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Lately, there has been an increasing urge for cooperation among European law enforcement organisations with border and coast guard functions. Significant areas of concern address the new cross-border challenges and promote mobility and social development in border areas. Admittedly, operational cooperation calls for substantiated training based on a shared, common understanding of this function. As a response, a Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Border and Coast Guarding (SQF) was developed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). This SQF presents the learning and content needed to perform tasks described as job competences across four levels (4-7 according to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and four main areas (Generic Border guarding, Border control,

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Cross-border investigation and intelligence, Supervision, management, leadership), paired with corresponding learning outcomes (Peres and Norris, 2013).

In an effort to ensure awareness and assimilation of the SQF and its principles of mobility, comparability and transparency at European and national level, Frontex initiated, developed, updated, quality-assured and conducted a 'Course design in line with Bologna/ Copenhagen principles using the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Border Guarding' since 2017 (Nitu, 2017). This course, along with the supporting training materials, is available to law enforcement trainers, developers and border guarding stakeholders in Europe, who actively contribute to the conceptual and practical harmonisation of the national border and coast guarding curricula and training.

This paper presents several aspects of this course, emphasizing its critical value for the development of European and national border guarding training systems, as well as its current developments and applications in this field. Firstly, the SQF will be integrated and justified by the larger European education framework, secondly, developments in three specific curricular areas – learning outcomes, learning and assessment strategies – will be discussed, followed by contextualized applications of the SQF in national course design – the case of Romania; lastly, a series of discussions and conclusions will extract and explore the core principles and recommendations in view of creating a feasible and practical action plan for national and European developers and organisers of vocational training programmes.

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## ***2. Background***

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One objective of the super-ordinate European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is to integrate cross-national Sectoral Qualifications, frameworks and systems (European Commission, 2008, 2009), such as the SQF for border and coast guarding, in order to make them more intelligible and accountable with the EQF. Previously, cross-national sectoral initiatives were often not part of formal education and not integrated or fostered by National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) developments; since then, however, there have been several initiatives in EU agencies supporting the referencing and integration of cross-national sectoral qualifications in institutional and national frameworks and training products.

Frontex developed a broader SQF for border guarding based on the modular Common Core Curricula, covering multiple border and coast guarding profiles. Frontex' support for national integration currently involves organising translators' workshops for a harmonised approach, providing training in course design using the SQF for Border guarding and developing a manual and training materials to support it, creating a pool of key trainers and external experts to support national integration and Frontex's alignment, providing consultancy to support national developments and quality assurance mechanisms for the SQF for Border guarding (Peres and

Norris, 2013). It is expected that over time each Member State will be able to describe its training in terms of the SQF (through the Frontex common curricula adopted by the national organisations).

Three clarifications and limitations should be made at this point about the SQF: it is a voluntary tool to facilitate the comparison of qualifications between EU countries in view of cooperative or joint initiatives (but not a framework to harmonise qualifications or qualifications standards between EU Members); it is a set of common features that make recognition easier at both European/international levels, as well as at national level (without introducing automatic recognition of qualifications between EU member states); it is a tool to inspire and facilitate the assessment and validation of skills acquired through work experience (not focused on the classification of each individual competence through its learning outcome). These limitations show that the SQF is by no means prescriptive, but has strategic implications in the development of national frameworks for border and coast guarding.

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### ***3. Developments regarding the implementation of specific sectoral qualifications frameworks for border guarding in course design***

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Specific developments have been registered notably in the area of learning outcomes, learning and assessment strategies, which can help national developers on their road to integrate referential SQFs into their curricula.

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#### ***3.1 Learning outcomes***

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Learning outcomes (LOs) are the grounds on which National Qualifications Frameworks are built; they are playing an incremental part in defining and writing national qualifications and curricula, and subsequently aim at harmonizing the concepts of assessment and training. The 2008 EQF recommendation defines LOs as ‘...statements of what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process’ (European Commission, 2008: 12). The LO approach is favoured in a significant number of contexts: qualifications frameworks and their level descriptors; course development; assessment, evaluation and quality assurance; practicalities of vocational training and education.

These contexts allow developers and trainers to place the learner and the level of competence they are expected to achieve in the centre of attention. The most useful and commonly applied LOs are set as realistic and attainable descriptions of any of the following: knowledge, practical skills, cognitive skills, levels of autonomy and responsibility, and learning skills (European Commission, 2008). LOs must also be capable of assessment and should be fit for their purpose, whether they are employed

at the level of the individual module, the qualification, as a level or qualifications descriptor (Cedefop, 2018).

When designing LOs, several steps may be considered:

1) By acknowledging the need for and advantages of using LOs instead of teaching objectives, we enable the training programme to become learner-centred, rather than teacher-centred. In the following example below we can see how the LO reflects what the learner can do, rather than what the trainer can teach: “Operate specific equipment and technology available for border control and interpret the results according to defined guidelines”. (Peres and Norris, 2013, vol. II: 35)

2) When considering the types of LOs (Knowledge, Skills and Competence we should pay particular attention to the three parts of the LO: main verbs, topic and context. The main verbs are based on Bloom’s taxonomy, expressing thinking skills in the order of complexity (Kennedy, 2007). In the example above, we identify the main verb “operate”, the topic “specific equipment and technology” and the context “border control”.

3) National competence levels need to be cross-referenced with the more comparable SQF levels 4, 5, 6, 7. Words such as *basic*, *initial*, *advanced* describing a training programme may have a different meaning for various users. A system of levels that are comparable across institutions may make qualifications more recognizable. The difference between SQF levels can be shown by the difference in verbs and quantifiers across an area.

Example of Level 4 LO in the SQF: see the example above.

Example of Level 5 LO: “Effectively operate a broad range of equipment and technology available for border control and evaluate results”. (Peres and Norris, 2013, vol. II: 37)

Example of Level 6 LO: “Differentiate between systems and technologies available for border control, compare their suitability, supervise and evaluate the operational deployment and results”. (Peres and Norris, 2013, vol. II: 39)

Example of Level 7 LO: “Review and assess the technologies and systems deployment in the context of legal and budgetary frameworks, considering emerging technologies and systems”. (Peres and Norris, 2013, vol. II: 39)

At this point it is important to find similar verbs, topics and contexts in the existing competences, and try to place them across levels 4-7, according to their complexity. We may realize most competences go towards level 4 and possible 5, whereas levels 6 and 7 are not as representative. This is perfectly normal and acceptable, as most border guarding competences – just as any other occupational competences – are layered in a pyramid structure, building upon a more representative lower set of which only a few reach maximum complexity. We may also realize that a former *basic* course and a corresponding *advanced* course are both level 4, for example.

4) LOs should be then identified in the SQF based on their similarity with the existing or desired competences. The ones that best fit the needs should be listed, then adapted to better adjust to the identified job competences. Adaptation usually involves changing / narrowing down the topic area (subject matter) and context, rather than the verb. Changing the verb might lead to a change in the level of the LO. If there are multiple verbs, we may consider dividing the LO into more LOs, so that each LO contains one verb only; this makes the LO easier to measure and assess.

The LO used as an example in point 1) can be adapted as: <Operate airport surveillance cameras to detect criminal acts in public areas respecting data protection, in accordance with established procedures>. The LO is still level 4, but by narrowing down the topic and context we can make it as specific and fit-for-purpose as possible. It is worth mentioning that a Fundamental Rights component is interpreted and integrated into the LO. This is a crucial area in course design, as all law enforcement and more specifically border and coast guards should perform their tasks in full compliance with the fundamental rights principles, which guides the entire learning described by the SQF (Nitu, Peres, Ryan, 2017).

5) There are situations when no SQF LO fits the needs, in which case a new LO can be created. All LOs should have the following characteristics: be specific, learner-oriented, clear and measurable. Each LO should begin with one active verb, followed by the object/topic of the verb followed by a phrase that gives the context. We should avoid vague terms like *know*, *understand*, *learn*, *be familiar with*, *be exposed to*, *be acquainted with*, and *be aware of*, as they are associated with teaching objectives rather than LOs (Kennedy, 2007). The tailored LO in point 4) is an example of specific and measurable LO.

6) Cross-reference the resulting LOs with the original competence or starting point, to see all aspects have been covered and that there are no overlaps across the new LOs. Cross-referencing implies all aspects of the job competences can be found in the newly developed LOs. If aspects are left out, supplementary LOs should be considered.

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### 3.2 Learning and assessment strategies

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The concept of learning strategy – seen as a description of the learning path or roadmap taken by the learners to achieve the LOs - is based on the principle of constructive alignment, where the three major elements of course design should be interconnected (Schumaker and Deshler, 1992; Nitu, Peres, Ryan, 2017). The learning strategy is more than a list of methods and activities: the strategy facilitates the progression of learning, explaining how learning is achieved and why this is the most effective way.

The learner journey can be described in building blocks (logical chunks of the course), for example: modules – large stand-alone blocks of learning; can have their own titles and function separately or interdependently; phases – smaller blocks of learning, within each module as appropriate; can be differentiated in terms of situation / learning environment. There may be three types of phases: 1) Independent Learning Phase – conducted usually online, independently, covering knowledge-type LOs; learner working can include online interactions with trainers and other learners and needs a virtual learning management system; 2) Contact Learning Phase – is conducted face-to-face, is intense, covering skills and competences; needs specialists, equipment, visits; can include interactions with trainers, tutors, workplace colleagues, other learners; 3) Experiential Learning Phase – is conducted in the workplace, is highly contextualised, usually covering competences and may need a virtual learning management system. These phases follow the principles of blended learning, usually described as a designed mix of learning activities with planned linkages between time, location and contexts of learning activities, with some use of online technology (Nitu, Peres, Ryan, 2017).

The smallest blocks of learning are the sessions. Design of individual sessions would normally follow once the basic course structure and strategy have been defined. The course learning strategy is the key reference for the design of individual sessions. Further, to design learning activities we need to consider both: the types of learning outcomes and the types of learning situations and environment(s) / resources. There has to be a correlation between the types of learning outcome, learning activities and assessment tasks.

We also need to consider time for learning, practice and revision; sufficient time for learning before the assessment should also be allocated and opportunities for feedback from trainers and peers. Relevant preparatory materials for assessment should be made available to the learners. We should also consider opportunities for Recognition of Prior Learning, including formal (certified), informal (structured but not recognized) and non-formal (on the job) courses and experience that are measurable and reflect the same LOs. This avoids duplication of learning and wasting resources.

The assessment strategy is closely connected with the learning strategy and should fully reflect the learning outcomes, should be operationally relevant and authentic, and consider current developments (Nitu, Peres, Ryan, 2017). An effective implementation of assessment should ensure that learners have actually demonstrated achievement of the learning outcomes in order to pass. Assessment is valuable for a number of reasons: to measure performance, motivate and direct learning, improve future performance, ensure quality assurance of standards, and ultimately set comparable standards and awards (Cedefop, 2018). A certificate is expected to be issued at the successful completion (or pass) of a formal training programme.

The type of assessment task should reflect the type of learning outcome. Examples of online assessments (quiz types) are: Drag and drop, Select correct answers, True / False; Multiple Choice Questions; Matching; Select missing words; Short answer; Essay. The essay type can be answered by either: the learner completing an online template; the learner completing the task on their computer / tablet and uploading a file.

The task instructions, grading system and assessment descriptor (performance criteria and indicators) should be clearly described. The easiest scheme for a vocational training context is Pass (= Competent) / Fail, followed by feedback consisting of more detailed information about aspects of performance; this is used to support the grade and offer a final learning opportunity (Nitu, Peres, Ryan, 2017). There should be a clear statement of what a competent profile (Pass) looks like, available to the learners. Each individual assessment task has to be passed to prove that the learner has reached the competence required by any training programme.

A part of this strategy is also the approximation of the time required by learners to do the assessments. An estimate of time required to prepare for and complete assessment tasks should be included in the course template. Also the time required by trainers to design assessment tasks, support for learners in preparation, do grading and feedback may indicate the number of trainers / subject-matter experts required by the assessment. Extensions can be granted to learners for assessments that cannot be taken in time, grounded on a formal request supported by a reasonable explanation.

Finally, sample assessments may be provided to support preparation for the assessment. Feedback should be given consistently and an opportunity for reassessment should be envisaged, measuring the same learning outcome(s), to give learners fair chances for improvement and graduation.

Designing learning outcomes and strategies in line with the sectoral qualifications framework is a lengthy but rewarding process; the description of the stages and the guidance provided in this article aim to ease the path for developers who design or review vocational training programmes, such as border guarding courses.

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#### ***4. Applications of sectoral qualifications frameworks in national border guarding course design***

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The current state of play in national bodies with border and coast guard functions across the EU calls for the improvement of training cooperation, harmonisation of training and networking of relevant actors. The need for improved coordination originates from situations identified in feasibility studies (Zaidi et al., 2017) documenting the state of affairs in Member States. The responsibility for carrying out border and coast guard functions across the EU is distributed among hundreds of

national public authorities of EU Member States, and arrangements vary widely among the Member States, with a mix of civilian, police and military authorities often involved. Such variety may pose obvious challenges related, among others, to: interoperability and cooperation initiatives; cross-reference and comparability of qualifications; consistency in training, terminology, assessment; sharing best practices, experiences, benchmarks, experts; acknowledgement of formal, informal and non-formal learning.

A case where successful attempts have been made in the larger area of border guarding is represented by Romanian institutions with border guard functions, namely Police Academy (levels 6 – BA and 7 – Masters), training schools (level 4), further training institutions (level 5), cooperating with Frontex for seven years with a view to update and align national curricula with the SQF for Border Guarding. The process started almost thirteen years ago, when all the tertiary education went through an alignment process with the EQF, following the Bologna process recommendations. Later on, the Common Core Curriculum for Border Guarding developed by Frontex issued recommendations for all institutions with border guarding functions (Peres and Norris, 2018), resulting in an NQF developed by the Romanian Border Guarding Inspectorate based on a translation of the CCC (Basic and Mid-Management) and a cross-reference with existing curricula. The product was endorsed by stakeholders and is continually subject to revision and updates. When the SQF for Border Guarding appeared later on, it was seen as an instrument to ease the alignment of the national requirements with the EU-origin recommendations, to calibrate the levels in view of setting comparable qualifications, facilitate mobility of Romanian border guards to EU training and operational duties, incorporate cooperation-based expertise, best practices and training products. The Romanian Border guarding NQF is thus an ongoing process, supporting yearly updates and revisions, considering both national and EU developments.

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## ***5. Discussion***

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It is useful to see these considerations as a starting point for the development of national qualifications frameworks, which would enable Member States to: share a harmonised view of border and coast guarding training across the EU; build comparable and transparent national qualifications frameworks; and increase their potential in training products and operational cooperation. This section offers suggestions and recommendations on how to consider national and institutional needs and incorporate the relevant parts of the SQF into Member States' qualification frameworks and training products related to border and cost guarding.

Member States should ensure that officials with border and coast guarding functions are specialised, properly trained and showing recognized and measurable competences. They will also frequently cooperate with fellow professionals from



other EU states. Cooperative initiatives, such as joint deployment plans, call for harmonised procedures, common understanding, shared practices and similar qualifications. Striving for more consistency and collaboration throughout the Member States authorities is desirable and highly recommended. The following points may give some directions in this sense: they are not meant as a reader of the existing SQF, but a basis on which national authorities can initiate and develop their own NQFs and ensuing training programmes.

The key feature of NQFs as a tool for change is the fact that they create a common area and grounds for all stakeholders, where they can exchange information and practices on learning, assessment and qualifications. When stakeholders try to identify and explain alignments between their different sets of qualifications, they employ key concepts, such as ‘learning outcomes’, seen as an objective and reliable method to set comparability and compatibility standards, focusing on competence as a main goal for training programs. Making qualifications and practices visible and understandable across sectors is a challenge, but this endeavour can be supported by concrete and clear descriptions of practice and benefits. NQFs lay the foundation for a long-term strategy that could have a formative effect on curricula and qualifications.

The concrete benefits of considering the SQF for national border and coast guarding authorities may be summarised as follows:

- Reviewing job competences and occupational standards in the field can be facilitated by using a common ‘language’ describing knowledge, skills and competences and the level of learning required to achieve them.
- National accreditation and validation processes of qualifications and training programmes can benefit from their reference to the SQF, by reference to concepts such as learning outcomes, EQF level of learning, quality assurance mechanisms.
- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the area of border guarding is enabled by SQF description of acquired competences, which may lead to valid and reliable on-the-job learning and assessments, as well as consideration of learning with no formal recognition delivered by Member States training organisations.
- The development of comparable training programs based on the SQF would make possible exchange-mobility programmes that are operationally relevant among the Member States and between Member States and EU agencies.
- The process of aligning courses, curricula and qualifications to the SQF can be supported by EU agencies promoting such integration, in learning events and exchanges involving a large number of EU training institutions simultaneously.

- Member States can relate their NQF to a product which has its own quality assurance methodology and a monitoring scheme to review the framework in the coming years in view of including feedback and recent developments.

A sectoral NQF is reflected in concrete terms in the training products: simple or modular courses, workshops, seminars. Designing courses starts with the NQF and resumes to it to prove/disprove its functionality and validity and update its content systematically in line with operational changes and developments. Courses may need revision along the way too to answer the needs established by feedback and self-evaluation. It is important to treat the processes of design and review diligently, acknowledging they require different critical thinking skills and experience. To help this process, some steps may be of practical use:

- Map the current courses in line with the new NQF to identify the existing competences.
- Cross-reference job competences/profiles with the ones in the core curricula (if available).
- Use an established template for a course descriptor, assessments, online materials, agenda etc. to make the product more accountable, comparable and organised.
- Consider constraints: time, environment, equipment, no. of hours, no. of trainers, no. of learners, entry requirements.
- Select LOs from the NQF and adjust them so they fit the aims of the programme and can be realistically achieved considering the available resources. The LOs indicate the focus of the course (knowledge / skills / autonomy and responsibility) as well as the level of the course (from 4 to 7).
- Consider learning and assessment strategies to support the LOs following the principle of constructive alignment.
- Decide on the suitable types, modes and methods of learner-centred learning, with a view on blended learning.
- Provide opportunities for assessment, self-assessment, re-assessment, which should be valid, reliable, equitable, authentic.
- Include opportunities for peer and trainer feedback throughout the training programme.
- Check all public information is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.
- Follow up on any feedback (cross-reference, feedback analysis) to monitor, review and revise programmes on a cyclical basis.

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## ***6. Conclusions***

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Understanding the key concepts of course design in line with Bologna and Copenhagen processes and in compliance with the existing SQF for border and coast

guarding is an important step in the development of European and national training programmes in this field. The design of learning outcomes, as well as learning and assessment strategies is the keystone of the process of course design, and its implications in educational standards support and legitimize the principles of transparency and comparability in education and training.

EU policies promote cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation. Training is a key for cooperation, and training cooperation is the key for interoperability within the border and coast guarding area. Developing NQFs for this function will enable comparability and transparency of qualifications and a more harmonious cooperation in the area, especially in areas covered by joint deployment plans. As shown, using the SQF at national level can, among other things, support the review of job competence profiles and occupational standards, help develop compatible and comparable training programmes in this vocational area, facilitate the integration at national level of EU-developed core curricula, manage operationally-relevant training and resources better and share a common understanding and language for learning and qualifications in the area of border and coast guarding.

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