

## Concept Note and Programme Summary

### Ireland EU Presidency 2026 Conference:

## Unlocking Skills Mobility: The Role of European Transparency Tools to Drive the Skills Portability Initiative and Talent Mobility

12-14 October 2026,  
Dublin, Ireland

### Background

The [Union of Skills](#) is a major European Union (EU) strategy launched by the European Commission in March 2025 to address skills shortages, support lifelong learning and make the EU's workforce more competitive and adaptable. It aims to strengthen education and training, promote regular upskilling and reskilling, improve the portability of skills across EU countries, and attract, develop, and retain talent from within the EU and globally. The initiative is built around four key pillars:

- building strong foundational skills,
- making continuous learning the norm,
- facilitating mobility of skills across the single market, and
- boosting the EU's ability to draw in and keep skilled workers.

It includes actions such as pilot schemes for basic skills support and a skills guarantee, a skills portability initiative, support for digital and STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) education, and measures to attract global talent.

The [Skills Portability Initiative](#) (SPI) aims to make people's skills and qualifications more transparent, understandable, and usable so workers and learners can move and work more easily throughout the Single Market and employers can better recognise and use skills from anywhere in the EU. A key action of the initiative is to simplify how the skills and qualifications of non-EU nationals are recognised, making Europe more attractive for global talent and addressing labour shortages. While several actions are proposed under the SPI, there are a number that relate to European transparency tools, some of which are outlined below:

- improving transparency and comparability of skills and qualifications (including micro-credentials) acquired in different Member States by ensuring that Member States have comprehensive and operational National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) in place that are referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
- ensuring that up-to-date information on NQF qualifications is available on an EU platform to professionals, employers and authorities, through up-to-date

national qualifications registries and including ESCO (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) skills in their descriptions.

- ensuring that skills documented through micro-credentials issued by accredited education and training institutions are more visible and comparable – by including them in the NQFs and making sure they are formulated in line with the EU approach to micro-credentials.
- making further comparisons of frameworks related to qualifications issued in countries outside the EU with the EQF.
- ensuring that individuals can share their qualifications and skills credentials digitally (e.g. with employers), leveraging the EU Digital Identity Wallet under the eIDAS Regulation and relying on this interoperability framework for secure seamless cross-border recognition.

## Introduction

The event programme will focus on two key aspects of the Skills Portability Initiative, namely **Third Country Qualifications Framework Comparison**<sup>1</sup> and the development and implementation of **micro-credentials**. The programme will span three days with the following high-level structure.

- **Day 1: Monday 12 October** – small focus group workshop (approx. 12-15 people) focused on identifying practical solutions to enhancing existing transparency tools to support countries outside the EU, often referred to as third countries, and strengthening post comparison activities to deliver trust and transparency in their qualifications. This workshop will be invite only.
- **Day 2: Tuesday 13 October** – Public conference (approx. 180-200 people) with a mix of keynote speeches, panel discussions and short presentations to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with third country comparison and micro-credentials, and the tension between European and third country approaches. Participants will be invited to express interest in attending via an online form. Registration links will be issued to successful participants to ensure a balance of representation across countries, sectors and subject areas.
- **Day 3: Wednesday 14 October** – QQI will host a study visit for visiting third country representatives (approx. 12-15) regarding the design, implementation and communication of the Irish NFQ. This will be held in collaboration with the European Training Foundation, and participants will be agreed by ETF.
- **Day 3: Wednesday 14 October** – QQI will host a meeting of regional qualifications frameworks representatives. (Invite only)

## Context

### *Third Country Qualifications Frameworks Comparisons*

Updated [Guidelines on Comparisons of the EQF and Third Country Qualifications Frameworks](#) were recently published, following three pilot comparisons with the [Cabo Verde NQF](#), [Ukrainian NQF](#) and with the regional Southern African Development Community (SADC) Qualifications Framework. There is an expectation that further comparisons will be undertaken because of the Skills Portability Initiative. There are already two EU funded projects underway to conduct preliminary studies that will lead to further EQF comparisons namely with the Indian National Skills Qualifications Framework and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Qualifications Reference Framework. Additional comparison studies will be carried out in line with EU policy priorities in the context of Talent Partnerships which are ongoing with Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

While these guidelines are new, the activity of studying third country qualifications frameworks is not. The EQF was originally compared to the [Australian Qualifications Framework](#) (AQF), the [New Zealand Qualifications Framework](#) (NZQF) and [Hong Kong Qualifications Framework](#) (HKQF) about a decade ago. The Irish NFQ was also compared directly with the NZQF and HKQF at the same time.

Since its departure from the EU, the status of the United Kingdom in the context of the EU is less clear. The frameworks associated with the four jurisdictions were referenced to the EQF in 2019 prior to the departure, but this referencing is not as visible and transparent as other countries with direct referencing to the EQF. Ireland maintains a relationship to the UK and its qualifications frameworks via the UK and Ireland Qualifications Frameworks Group which meets annually and maintains the [Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries Guide](#), which enables broad comparison of qualifications across the UK and Ireland but relies on the EQF as a coordinating reference point.

### *Micro-credentials*

In 2022, the European Commission adopted a [Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability](#), in response to the growth and development of micro-credentials globally. While the recommendation is non-prescriptive, reflecting the multi uses of micro-credentials, the consultation regarding the Skills Portability Initiative suggests that legislative amendments will be sought to require the inclusion of micro-credentials in national frameworks. While Ireland has the capacity to include micro-credentials in the NFQ and has done so since 2003, a resolution has not yet been reached regarding the evolving role and purpose of small qualifications in the Irish education, training and employment system. This highlights the complexities associated with regulating micro-credentials in this dynamic environment.

NQFs and the qualifications included in them are inherently stable and provide a level of certainty to end users of qualifications. Micro-credentials, on the other hand, tend to be innovative, agile and flexible and this does not easily align with the concepts of qualifications frameworks. There may be unintended consequences of bringing micro-credentials into qualifications frameworks impacting the inherent benefit they offer learners and employers.

Additionally, Ireland has been central to many discussions and explorations of the role of micro-credentials across many jurisdictions including UK, Europe, New Zealand, South Africa and Türkiye, and our understanding of the role and purpose of micro-credentials becomes more nuanced with every meeting. Micro-credentials are context specific and as such, the systems for designing, developing, implementing and regulating them will, and should be quite different. Some countries are most interested in using micro-credentials to keep young people in education when they have not been offered a place in tertiary education while for others it's about reskilling large workforces as industries change significantly or disappear entirely. In Europe, there is an emphasis on flexible engagement with traditional qualifications or 'stacking' as well as a labor market and skills focus.

Third countries are looking at the European approach to micro-credentials to inform their own policies and regulations, despite vastly different contexts. There is a need to balance concerns about portability and recognition of credentials, with meeting needs within national contexts. It is timely to consider the suitability of the EQF to relate different systems of micro-credentials to each other, and challenge assumptions about the role of qualifications frameworks in the management of micro-credentials in the medium and long term. While micro-credentials are one aspect of inclusive and flexible education, other considerations such as non-formal qualifications might be more relevant.

## Rationale

Ireland was an active member of the EQF Project Group on Third Country Dimension and a member of the working group tasked with conducting the comparison with the SADC QF. Ireland has been involved in both preliminary studies with India and ASEAN and enjoys the reputation of being expert in the implementation and comparison of qualifications frameworks. It is timely to bring together the experience of those frameworks originally studied over a decade ago, with the perspectives of recently compared national and regional frameworks, with the aspirations and expectations of those countries hoping to participate in comparison projects in the future. Furthermore, Ireland is a natural intermediary between the EU and our UK colleagues, and it is timely to consider their evolving role as a third country with reference to the EU.

There is a need to explore and evaluate both the conceptual drivers of the comparison process and the practical solutions that would add greater value to the experience for third countries. The Skills Portability Initiative points to new developments for NQFs of EU countries and there is an opportunity to discuss the potential unintended consequences of encouraging third countries to adopt Eurocentric approaches to

qualifications to smooth mobility of learners, portability of qualifications and recognition of skills. This is particularly relevant in the context of micro-credentials.

Furthermore, Ireland is a nation that is inherently interested in talent mobility both in and out of the country. Irish people have long been one of our greatest exports and our economy and educational institutions have significantly benefited from inward migration. As such, the ability to better understand how third country qualifications frameworks relate to our own is of significant interest to us, and EU colleagues. While a deeper consideration of how micro-credentials might evolve dependent on country contexts might also help us understand the tools that will be required to support their recognition in the long term.

## Key Objectives

- **Explore and identify practical solutions and digital tools to increase the transparency, visibility and impact of the outcome of Third Country comparisons, and to support communication to end users.** This includes amending existing transparency tools to accommodate third countries, considering the availability of digital infrastructure and reviewing the Europass webpages.
- **Understand Third Country perspective on comparison and explore challenges and opportunities for post-comparison activities.** This includes experiences from countries that participated in studies 10 years ago, completed the recent pilot comparisons and those who intend to participate in the future.
- **Address the role of the UK in EQF referencing and/or third country comparison approaches.** The UK is no longer included in active monitoring of its NQF via the European Inventory published by Cedefop and information about its relationship with EQF is not transparent. Third country comparison might be a more suitable approach in the longer term.
- **Explore the relationship between micro-credentials and non-formal education provision.** Micro-credentials are often delivered in the non-formal education system, and this relationship might be important to explore to enable a direct relationship between micro-credentials and qualifications frameworks.
- **Explore suitability of qualifications frameworks as a means of regulating micro-credentials.** There is a potential for legislative amendments to require the inclusion of micro-credentials in national qualifications frameworks which might not deliver the context specific purposes of micro-credentials in different countries with diverse drivers of agile, flexible learning.
- **Explore the impact of Eurocentric approaches on third countries qualifications and credential systems.** Third countries are looking to Europe for guidance on how best to develop national qualifications systems and frameworks for micro-credentials and there is a need to consider if European approaches are adaptable to developing countries.

## Additional Information

The conference is being organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Irish National Europass Centre (NEC) and the Irish European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point (EQF NCP) in co-operation with and support from the European Commission, European Training Foundation (ETF) and Cedefop.

## Target Audience

The event is primarily targeted at key stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks in Ireland, the EU and third countries, including national co-ordination points, social partners and policy makers.

## Contact

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