

## The structure of the High Vocational-Professional Education (HVPE) Area

### Ideas for international common names and terms

#### The Level 5 Area

Part 5  
January 2025

#### Preamble

This document concerns proposals relating to the international Tertiary Education Area, based on all types of formal and non-formal qualifications at levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. This TEA is divided into a number of sectors. These can be clearly defined on the basis of a number of criteria and with the use of instruments that explicitly determine such a sector.

This is an approach that applies to the international classification of the TEA and the sectors indicated therein. In addition, English names are given that are proposed to be used in the international context. These can be used in international cooperation and agreements based on this between countries, institutions and organizations, as the associated sectors have their own defined characteristics.

Every country that wants to participate in this process in one way or another has complete freedom to design its own 'National Tertiary Education Area', with a self-chosen subdivision and appropriate criteria. Choices are made regarding having names for all kinds of concepts, often in the national language. If the government then uses English translations within one's own official communication about the national system, it can also choose one's own approach. There is no international body that can prescribe and enforce this.

We hope that in the coming years more and more countries will base themselves on our proposal and work with it. This can be compared to the Bologna Process that led to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Voluntary agreements have been established that people can adhere to in all kinds of partnerships. It is true that there are still countries that design certain deviating constructions, for all kinds of reasons. Countries can address each other within the EHEA about these matters, but never force each other to make the right adjustments. This can lead to misunderstandings and less transparent constructions and that is why we hope that our initiative will also lead to a form of harmonization for every National HEA.

In short, we work with international proposals and every country may and may participate in the process that we intend to initiate.

#### 1 Introduction

The series of documents concerns taking the initiative to set up an international process for the establishment of the High Vocational-Professional Education Area. To this end, we have introduced a division within the European Tertiary Education Area in terms of areas within which qualifications at levels 5 and above are offered. This includes two areas that focus on providing formal training:

- Higher Education – based on the European Higher Education Area
- High Vocational-Professional Education – within the High VPE Area, as we call it (and also known as Higher VET).

But we also draw specific attention to the so-called 'European Level 5 Area (EL5A)' that runs straight through these two areas, but also through the area for non-formal qualifications called Business-Personal Education and Training (and which is discussed in another document).

Here are the diagrams that belong to this, as also used in the other documents.

TERTIARY EDUCATION AREA						
Level EQF			European Higher Education Area			Cycle
8 7 6 5	BPET	HVPE	Unitary	Binary		Third Second First Short
			HE	PHE	AHE	

LEVEL 5 AREA						
Level EQF			European Higher Education Area			Cycle
5	BPET	HVPE	Unitary – HE	Binary – PHE – AHE		Short

## 2 Level 5 Area

One of the reasons that we at CHAIN5 have taken this initiative is so that level 5 qualifications can be offered in all parts of tertiary education. This does not mean, however, that this is the case in every country and every part. It is up to the national government to make a decision about this and to adopt a vision in that regard.

This means that we will discuss the possibilities available here, so that we can look at it from an international perspective. Countries that seek cooperation with other countries for certain types of qualifications can conclude agreements on this basis. It thus promotes transparency around programmes, exchanges, platforms, networks and the like.

### 2.1 Level 5 embedded between 4 and 6, but sometimes 'different'

Our approach is based on the use of the EQF and therefore the NQFs that have now been included in all countries, also within the EHEA.

It is worth repeating here that although an NQF may be used in a country, it does not automatically mean that all types of qualifications within an education system are assigned a level number. A few examples of this:

1. In a country, the formal courses (cycles) in the National Higher Education Area are not assigned to NQF levels. Only the terms short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle are used.
2. In a country, the law can stipulate that non-formal qualifications can only be classified by the NCP up to and including level 6 of the EQF, to avoid confusion with formal education at levels 7 and 8.
3. In a country the situation may be that the NQF only applies to formal education. The non-formal qualifications have their own frameworks and associated instruments.

We can therefore take this into account, especially when it comes to the arguments that a government uses for not offering all types of qualifications the opportunity to be assigned a level via the NCP. There are of course many training programmes in every country that do not lend themselves to being linked to an NQF. They can be offered once, they are often tailored to specific companies, they are adjusted every year, and there can be several other reasons.

In addition, there is now discussion about the positioning of the so-called micro-credentials. Due to their design, they seem very difficult to link to a framework that mainly arises from the need to accommodate formal training. A solution for this still needs to be found. Of course, an NQF could then include not eight but - say - 20 levels, but then a country would be completely at odds with the EQF.

Countries are also struggling with 'informal qualifications' that are often seen as 'personal certificates' that record the competences someone has acquired in a certain environment. It is virtually impossible to link this to a clear level of the NQF. That is why we are also ignoring that category of qualifications here, in this stage.

### 2.3 Level 5 as bridge between secondary and tertiary education

In addition to the positioning between levels 4 and 6, it is certainly important to emphasize that a National Level 5 Area bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary education. Then the following classification, to keep it simple, concerns the formal qualifications:

<b>Tertiary Education Area</b>	
Higher Education	High Vocational-Professional Education
<b>Secondary Education Area</b>	
General Education	Vocational Education and Training

Then there must be learning paths that connect both areas. But all kinds of scenarios can occur nationally. We give a few, but note that there are also national regulations for the transition, with additional requirements, programs or other conditions. We are concerned here with the 'system'.

<b>Available in a country for level 5</b>	<b>Situation concerning progression</b>
There is the Short Cycle (within an unitary or binary system) No HVPE-A	In most cases, someone from secondary education can choose the Short Cycle or the First Cycle
No Short Cycle There is HVPE-A	From secondary education, someone can opt for the First Cycle or HVPE-A, with a possible subsequent switch to the First Cycle.
There is the Short Cycle (within an unitary or binary system) There is HVPE-A	Someone can choose from both options, partly in view of the subsequent continuations
No Short Cycle No HVPE-A (and no HVPE-B)	The only option in the formal context is the choice of the First Cycle

All mentioned scenarios will be included in the discussions that will undoubtedly arise when the process is started. The last two scenarios are the most interesting because they can benefit from the choices that have already been made nationally. The lack of formal training at level 5 in particular can be a reason to investigate, for example, whether non-formal training programs at level 5 or work-based learning using certificates are used in such a case.

As indicated in the table, whether a country has a binary NHEA also counts. In that case, the Short Cycle may, for example, be included in Professional Higher Education but not in Academic Higher Education. The continuation after the Short Cycle can then be completed in various ways within a national education system.

### 4 Instruments within a National Level 5 Area

As can be seen, a National Level 5 Area offers the opportunity to make the more obvious choices, such as from General Education to Higher Education. But the government can also choose to create more flexibility. But this requires a lot of cooperation from all sides. Higher education institutions, HVPE Institutes, VET Colleges and all educational associations need to agree on how to achieve all this. In a country with a binary system for higher education, this becomes a lot more difficult, especially if all kinds of learning paths can be identified within secondary education.

Now it is the case that within the Level 5 Area, if we look for its organization at an international level for the use of the necessary instruments that suit it, we have to deal with at least three situations:

1. The use of instruments within the EHEA that were developed within the Bologna Process and also apply to the Short Cycle must be respected.
2. Within the VET sector, agreements have also been made at international level for instruments that are comparable to those used within the EHEA. However, it should already be noted that they cannot be established internationally or simply have their own approach, which may or may not be 'compatible' with what is used in the EHEA. Sometimes the approach with an instrument resembles what is used in the EHEA, with all kinds of frameworks and regulations in a country, but on closer inspection it may be concluded that there are clear differences.
3. Within already existing HVPE areas (under different names), all kinds of countries have developed all kinds of their own instruments due to the lack of an international approach and the inability to use appropriate frameworks. If we continue our approach to a process, this will mean

that if it is a success, a national government can simply leave everything the same or still make adjustments that are in line with international agreements.

Furthermore, some countries have very likely already made national agreements for the following pairs of sectors, if they exist in that country:

1. Flow from the VET sector to the NHEA
2. Progression from HVPE-A to the Bachelor of the NHEA
3. Flow within a binary system to the NHEA.

It means very clearly that choices have to be made when it comes to common instruments within the European Level 5 Area, given the feasibility of achieving widely accepted use of them.

## **5 Using NQF and non-formal qualifications**

The whole thing we have in mind is partly based on the use of the EQF and therefore the NQFs. It should be noted that in principle a non-formal qualification can be registered with the NCP, after which the classification takes place on the basis of a set procedure - often on the basis of 'the best fit'. It will differ from country to country how the status of the provider is assessed, the way in which the quality of the program is assured, the approach to examinations and the study load, to name a number of things. But it seems that the level comes first and other matters are left to the institutions and national organizations involved that are expressly concerned with this.

In our process we first focus on formal educational qualifications. Including the Business-Personal Education and Training sector would therefore not be useful at this moment, given the strong diversity in the instruments used. We will include the BPET area at a later stage. In the meantime, it is up to those involved to what extent and to what extent they decide to join in.

## **6 Possible instruments**

In a separate part of this series we will discuss the instruments that we will in any case include in our proposals. Here are the basic principles.

1. The types of instruments that are characteristic of the EHEA will in any case be included in the process, to see whether they are also used in other sectors and how this is done within their own context - looking at the number of countries that use this can be assessed, i.e. how relevant an instrument is within tertiary education as a whole.
2. Based on the instruments that are now internationally accepted within the VET sector, it is examined to what extent they are comparable with instruments in the EHEA and with HVPE areas in countries where they have already been developed.
3. The instruments developed by countries for their HVPE area are analyzed for their compatibility with the instruments of the EHEA and the VET areas.

All this will result in a list of instruments in a priority order. This means that in any case the most crucial instruments are chosen that are considered so important for all sectors that countries will choose their own design with a high degree of certainty.

In line with this, it will of course also be examined to what extent such instruments are suitable for the European Level 5 Area. It is possible that there are additional options, as a kind of 'bridge' between all kinds of scenarios. This also creates room for maneuver for the national approach..

## **7 And...**

The concept of 'European Level 5 Area' is quite new when it comes to developments in international education. There are also few countries that have developed a policy for their own National Level 5 Area. However, after the decision in 2018 to consider the Short Cycle as an independent and recognized qualification within the EHEA, with exactly the same instruments, it can be seen that considerable efforts are being made in certain countries. In these dynamic times on the labour market, many national governments see that the need for shorter formal training courses is growing rapidly.

But previously, in countries with a unitary higher education system, the government had converted the need for highly labor market-oriented courses at level 5 and higher into making it possible to create forms of Higher VET. This process could be further supported by the growth in the use of the NQFs.

In short, the time is ripe, so to speak, for the next steps.

The topics within this series are:

1. Classification of tertiary education, the positioning of the HVPEA and the use of international common names
2. A closer look at the division of tertiary education
3.
  - a Levels within the HVPEA
  - b Learning paths within the HVPEA
  - c Progression from 5 (HVPE - SCHE) to 6 (First Cycle)
  - d Top-up programmes at level 5
  - e Specific approach SCHE
4. Subdivision within the HVPEA and certificates
5. The positioning of the L5A
6. Use of credits in tertiary education, linked to sectors
7. Harmonization of instruments for the EHEA and the HVPEA – for example looking at the European Standards and Guidelines, the Dublin Descriptors and the ECTS for the EHEA, EQAVET, EQF-LLL descriptors and ECVET respectively.
8. Use of micro-credentials in the EL5A
9. Why having the EHEA and the HVPEA next to each other...