

# The Maltese VET system: a competence-based approach integrated with the European tools



Malta

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The Maltese VET system has been gradually revamped and revised since 2001 with the introduction of the Maltese Qualification Framework (MQF), the introduction of a learning outcomes approach and a credit-based system aligned with ECVET.

## Short summary paragraph

The Maltese VET system is rooted in the Maltese Qualification Framework, which is mapped to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Qualifications are composed in units of learning outcomes, quantified in workload hours or 'credits.' One credit is equivalent of 25 hours of learning workload. Credits are labelled as ECVET points for EQF levels 1 to 4 and ECTS points as of level 5.

ECVET principles play a key role in the Maltese VET system. Identification of groups of learning outcomes, separate assessment of groups of learning outcomes, and accumulation and transferability of learning outcomes are used to design Maltese VET qualifications.

The Maltese system allows for the validation of learning acquired in a non-formal and informal context. The validation process is based on National Occupational Standards (NOS), which define skills, knowledge and the assessment methods. The assessment is carried out by Jobplus,<sup>1</sup> the Maltese Public Employment Service.

Moreover, the use of the ECVET principles allows for the possibility of transfer and recognition of learning outcomes acquired during VET learner mobility. ECVET mobility tools and Europass are largely used by Maltese VET institutions for learning mobility. The Learning Agreement (LA) is used to ensure a common understanding of the content of learning outcomes and the responsibilities of sending and hosting institutions. The Europass Diploma Supplement and Learning Transcripts are used to document the learning outcomes acquired.

## Scope of project/initiative

National (Maltese Ministry of Education)

## When was the project/initiative implemented?

Gradual reforms, starting in 2001

## What were the source(s) of funding?

National (Ministry of Education and Employment<sup>2</sup>)

## Why was/is the project implemented?

In the late 1980s and 1990s, vocational education was not a popular choice for Maltese youth, compared to general education. This was due to a lack of investment and insufficient development. Revamp of the VET structure since 2001, has seen the development of a high-quality VET system in Malta.

Following the reforms, VET became more attractive, especially for secondary students leaving compulsory education. The participation of 17-year-olds in VET has increased from 45% in 2002 to 79% in 2015. However, the participation of 19-year-olds is lower and stable since 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Although decreasing, the overall rate of early school leavers is still among the highest in Europe (17.5% of early leavers in 2018, compared to 25.7% in 2009).<sup>4</sup> Yet, the youth unemployment rate remains one of the lowest in Europe (8.4% in August 2019).<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is caused by the Maltese economic structure which is characterised by a strong tourism industry with a high supply of low-skilled jobs. Students are tempted to leave education to start working. However, this may compromise their future employability, due to a lack of skills and qualifications.

<sup>1</sup> <https://jobsplus.gov.mt/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.gov.mt/en/Pages/educ.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4151\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4151_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat\\_lfse\\_14&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en)

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics)

**Which groups were targeted by the practice?**

The Maltese VET reforms aim to tackle this issue with a flexible VET system, allowing students that decide to leave education and start working to come back to education more easily.

Finally, before 2007, Malta did not have a transparent qualification framework in place, and the VET system was not aligned to European initiatives and tools. The Maltese Qualification Framework (MQF) aims to fill these gaps and to build up a system that enables horizontal and vertical permeability, encourage learning mobility and meet the increasing demand for a high-skilled workforce.

**What were the practice's main objectives?**

Students of secondary education, in compulsory education (aged 14 to 16-years-old) and in post-compulsory education (aged 16 and above), adults.

The Maltese VET system aims to tackle the challenges of an increasing demand of high-skilled workers in Malta. Until recently, that demand could not be met sufficiently, as:

- ▶ young people don't choose VET as an attractive route for further training (following compulsory education);
- ▶ the large supply of low-skilled employment opportunities in Malta attracts young people who leave education & training early.

The aim of the reform is to develop an attractive and flexible high-quality VET system for Malta, which offers more opportunities for work-based learning, and allows learners to return to education and training and/or go through a process of upskilling.

Finally, with the introduction of the MQF, VET qualifications are more transparent and understandable. At the base of the MQF is a learning outcomes-based approach which acknowledges the learners previously acquired skills, that can then be used as a base to develop a learning path.

It also offers a credit system in line with ECVET and ECTS. Furthermore, the Maltese VET system aims to provide VET opportunities that are in line with the needs of the labour market. Labour market actors were consulted at the start of developing the MQF. Their consultation led to the consolidation of the qualification framework, as well as to the definition of the level descriptors.

## What activities were carried out?

The MQF was introduced in 2007, it covers initial and continuous VET. The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE)<sup>6</sup> is the organisation responsible for all the aspects related to the MQF.

VET qualifications are composed of units of learning outcomes, in line with ECVET principles. Learning outcomes are “statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process”.<sup>7</sup> The level descriptors of the MQF levels are specified in terms of learning outcomes. In the Maltese system, the learning outcome approach is used for multiple purposes: recognition of prior learning; award of credits; and, ensuring quality, credibility and transparency. Units, as the smallest parts of a qualifications, can be transferred from one context to another.

The MQF was aligned with EQF and integrated with ECVET and ECTS credit systems. Units of learning outcomes are quantified in workload hours or ‘credits’. One credit point is an estimation to 25 hours of total learning. It indicates the time needed to complete all learning activities, as contact hours, practical sessions, mentoring, self-study, etc. ECVET is used for VET programmes at EQF levels 1 to 4, while ECTS only is used after level 5. The credit-based system allows permeability between VET, higher education and general education as students can transfer credits accumulated in a context to another. One credit is the equivalent of 25 hours of learning in both credit systems. This allows for vertical permeability: learners can move between different levels of the education and training system.

The VET system distinguishes between qualifications and awards. Qualifications are achieved when a study programme meets the MQF level of learning and the number of credits required. Awards are short courses, or self-standing units of a minimum of one credit point.

MQF levels are used as a common denominator for multiple actors. For instance, MQF levels are also used for incentives schemes, such as scholarships and tax rebates. Employers refer to MQF levels in recruitment and career development activities. Jobplus uses the MQF for issuing work permits.

The Maltese system, through the coordination by NCFHE, ensures the validation of non-formal and informal learning. So far, validation is allowed up to EQF level 3. Sectors skills units in priority sectors – health and social care, hair and beauty, automotive industry, printing, educational support<sup>8</sup> and hospitality and tourism – develop the NOS. NOS define what skills and knowledge are required for a specific occupation. NOS are linked to the MQF and are defined using the learning outcomes approach.

The NOS also sets up the assessment criteria. The assessment is carried out by Jobsplus through a trade testing system which evaluates knowledge, skills and competences. This system encompasses different types of assessments: interviews, written test and a practical assessment. During the interview technical knowledge, as well as interpersonal and communication skills, are assessed. The interviews usually last from 20 to 45 minutes. In addition, the assessors evaluate a competence portfolio, which provide proof of the learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts. Guidance is provided beforehand for the composition of the portfolio. A mentor assigned to each applicant will guide the applicant through the process of identifying the evidence that demonstrates that learning outcomes have been achieved. During the written test, knowledge, skills and competences of the candidates are further assessed. It includes multiple-choice and open-ended short answer questions, case studies and a short essay. Usually, the test is in English, but, on request, it can be in Maltese. During the practical test, the participants are asked to perform several tasks in line with the assessment criteria. Usually they take place at the candidates’ workplaces and last around four hours.

The candidates that are successful during the trade test are awarded a ‘Certificate of Competence’ (EQF level 3), which allows them to re-enter in education. The validation system is not yet linked with the credit system, NCFHE is in the process of piloting the use of ECVET credit points to overcome this gap.

Finally, learning mobility is also encouraged. As Malta is the smallest country in Europe, it is crucial for students to have the opportunity to integrate their knowledge with learning experiences abroad. ECVET tools, such as the LA and MoU, are largely used by the Maltese institutions. The LA and MoU describe the learning outcomes, the duration of the mobility and the responsibilities of sending and hosting institutions. Europass tools, such as the Diploma Supplement and Learning Transcripts, are also adopted.

<sup>6</sup> <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Referencing%20Report/Referencing%20Report%202016.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Professionals that support teachers (e.g. administrative professionals, teachers’ assistants)

What specific ECVET principles were/are used?

▶ **Principle 1: Qualifications should be composed of clearly defined groups of learning outcomes.**

The Maltese VET system is based on learning outcomes, which are intended as the smallest part of a qualification. Learning outcomes are understood as knowledge, skills and competences which can be assessed. Learning outcomes are grouped in units (or modules). The units approach enables the learners to acquire a full qualification or an award (a partial qualification).

▶ **Principle 2: Groups of learning outcomes within a qualification should be capable of independent assessment.**

Every VET school is responsible for the assessment method for each unit of learning outcome (modules). Assessment methods are defined during the VET programme accreditation stage and, usually, they are a mix of methods that fit the peculiarities of the modules.

▶ **Principle 3: The assessment of each group of learning outcomes should be properly documented.**

VET institutions are responsible for informing students about progress in their studies, units missed and learning outcomes achieved.

▶ **Principle 4: Provision of learning opportunities should be arranged to facilitate individuals to achieve learning outcomes.**

Maltese VET programmes are based on single units of learning outcomes, that can be completed separately to each other. During the accreditation process, VET providers are required to outline the content and the teaching methods for each module.

▶ **Principle 5: Individuals should have the opportunity to have their learning outcomes validated, irrespective of how and where they have acquired them.**

The learning outcomes approach allows the possibility of having the learning outcomes validated, independently from where they have been acquired. Learning outcomes acquired during mobility periods are recognised and validated. To do that, Maltese institutions make large use of ECVET and Europass tools, such as Learning agreements, the Diploma Supplement and the Learning Transcripts.

Furthermore, prior learning acquired in informal and non-formal learning contexts is assessed and validated. The assessment is carried out by Jobplus through a trade testing system, which involves different methods, such as interviews, competence portfolio, theory and practical tests. This results in the awarding of a 'Certificate of Competence' (EQF level 3), which allows successful candidates, if they wish, to re-enter in education.

▶ **Principle 6: Individuals should have the opportunity to accumulate their assessed groups of learning outcomes towards a qualification.**

VET qualifications are composed by units of learning outcomes. Once the units are assessed, they can be accumulated towards a qualification. Thanks to the validation of the learning acquired abroad, students can accumulate the learning outcomes as building blocks of the home institution. Furthermore, the Maltese system allows the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning.

▶ **Principle 7: Individuals should have the opportunity to transfer their groups of learning outcomes validated from a context to another context.**

The Maltese VET system allows individuals to have their learning outcomes acquired and validated in one context, transferred to another context. Learning outcomes validated during mobility are automatically recognised and transferred to the home qualification. Furthermore, the Maltese VET system allows the recognition of the learning outcomes acquired in informal and non-formal learning environments towards the awarding of a VET qualification at EQF level 3.

**What specific ECVET principles were/are used?**

► **Principle 8: Processes for development, assessment, validation and recognition of sets of learning outcomes should be transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.**

NCFHE is the relevant organisation in charge of quality assurance of VET programmes. Each VET institution submits the programme details to the NCFHE, accredited courses are then assessed by NCFHE and are linked to the MQF. When applying for the programme accreditation, VET institutions outline the target group and objectives of the course as well as learning outcomes, assessment methods and ECVET/ECTS credits for each module. VET programmes are audited every five years. VET schools are encouraged to carry out internal evaluations based on 11 standards.

**What was/is the added value of ECVET?**

ECVET principles are at the foundation of the Maltese VET system. Maltese qualifications are based on units of learning outcomes, which can be independently assessed. The learning outcomes approach facilitates the recognition of learning acquired in informal and non-formal learning contexts. This allows vulnerable groups, such as early school leavers, to return to education and training and upskill.

ECVET credit points are integrated in VET qualifications at EQF levels 1 to 4. Furthermore, the ECVET mobility tools are largely used by Maltese institutions for the validation of learning outcomes acquired abroad during learning mobility.

**Website**

[The National Commission for Further and Higher Education \(NCFHE\)](#) (EN only)

For more information, please also see:

[ECVET Magazine No. 30](#)

Presentations carried out during the Annual ECVET Forum 2017 "[Boosting Employability by Designing qualifications in terms of groups of learning outcomes-The case of Malta](#)"; and

["ECVET Malta"](#)

9 [https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/programme\\_accreditation.aspx](https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/programme_accreditation.aspx)  
10 Policy for internal quality assurance; Institutional probity; Design and approval of programmes; Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; Student admission, progression, recognition and certification; Teaching staff; Learning resources and student support; Information management; Public information; Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes and Cyclical external quality assurance. The guidelines for internal quality assurance are available online: <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/resources/Documents/Publications/Quality%20Assurance/Step%20by%20step%20guide%20to%20internal%20quality%20assurance.pdf>



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