

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

### Ideas for international common names and terms

### Subdivision within the HVPE Area and certificates

Part 4  
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

We are talking in our documents about creating a specific process for one of the sectors within the European Tertiary Education Area that builds on the VET sector. This is now called Higher VET, but in our opinion High Vocational-Professional Education (HVPE) is a better name for the qualifications that combine both approaches towards the labour market.

For the sake of clarity, it is of course the case that we are also in this context talking about an international approach when it comes to the name to be used for this type of providers. In a country one can easily take one's own names and concepts, in the national language.

In most situations HVPE is offered at the levels 5 and 6 of the EQF. But there may also be such institutions that provide qualifications at level 7 and possibly even also level 8 of the NQF (and the

EQF). That is why we would like to indicate in advance that the following designations can be used for the type of diplomas at the three first levels:

- HVPE-A (level 5)
- HVPE-B (level 6)
- HVPE-C (level 7)

Later we can take a look at level 8 in this way, being a specific one.

In this phase we therefore do not assume the award of degrees and international names, as is the case in the European Higher Education Area with Bachelor, Master and Doctorate (PhD) and possibly soon also Associate for level 5 (still to be fixed). But in the coming years, having names could well be the case if the providers in the countries involved (think of the 47 countries that are also now participating in the EHEA) can make agreements about this with each other.

## **2 Full qualifications**

From the start of the EHEA all countries have explicitly opted to work with so-called full degrees, i.e. having qualifications (cycles) based on standards for completing programs with full years and also semesters. An academic year is based on 60 credits, derived from the ECTS. However, it is up to a country itself to determine the study load for one credit, laid down in the law for national higher education, within certain limits for the minimum and maximum of it.

This means, for example, that the 'first cycle', the Bachelor, has a size of 180 to 240 credits. This bandwidth is related to the length of the previous (secondary) education, whether or not you have a binary system and other national agreements.

The collaboration between study programmes in different countries can be shaped on the basis of looking at parts of the study programs, often a semester or a year. But it can also apply to the entire programme, with double degrees and joint programs. The basic principle is that the same number of credits is linked to the joint part on both sides, but it is also possible to use only a set of 'learning outcomes'.

## **3 More detailed programmes - and micro-credentials**

It was not usual to look for a more detailed collaboration on a structural basis, i.e. at the level of units, modules and so on. Of course that is always possible, but it makes it quite difficult to assess each other's offer, to determine the level and to arrive at conclusive agreements.

With the discussion about using the so-called micro-credentials (MCs), this quest is being revived with the EHEA, partly because the Bologna Process has actually come more or less to an 'open end' if it is about real major challenges. This cooperation is now mainly based on the pursuit of European University Alliances, with international cooperation, but then more on the basis of agreements within a network or platform, around common areas of focus. Also the idea of having 'European Degrees' has come up recently, supported by the European Commission.

With MCs, it is actually about making agreements about the use of units, modules and other parts of formal and accredited training, within the EHEA. This mainly concerns having 'Higher Education Certificates', also based on the use of credits. Most of the Higher Education Institutions and accreditation bodies actually want to subject them to the same frameworks that apply to the four cycles, in order to arrive at a new form of flexibilization. The question is whether this will lead to good and useful results in the short term.

But many governments seem to embrace this aspiration anyway. However, it is suspected that good results cannot be expected in the short term, because of all the interests involved, and also because of the involvement of the private education sector, within which these forms of flexibilization have been customary for years.

## **3 HVPE Area and partial qualifications**

When it comes to starting a process that could lead to shaping a HVPE Area, we can make use of the experience gained with the EHEA, i.e. the Bologna Process, having from the start first of all the focus on full qualifications and the consequences of this approach.

The most important thing is that from the start we can also strive for a flexible implementation of the HVPE Area, i.e. not with all kinds of frameworks for a tightly completed system. Several formats can be used in this area, in order to be able to respond to multiple target groups.

Here a number of ideas are given for the process, not yet complete, but it can be seen as a starting point. And again we are looking at an international process, and then every country can decide about what is interesting in the national context.

### **3.1 Basis**

The HVPE Area can rely on the following matters:

- The basis of the sector is that there is a framework for qualifications that can be linked to the NQF and therefore also to the EQF.
- The EQF levels concerned are 5, 6, 7 and 8. The highest entry level for qualifications offered within the European Tertiary Education Area is 4.
- As long as there are no international names available for these levels – leaving out level 8 at this moment - we can associate symbols with them:  
A = 5  
B = 6  
C = 7.

### **3.2 Providers**

In another document we indicated that in practice HVPE Institutes will mainly focus on levels 5 and 6. There are two options to make their position visible with its own entity within the national Tertiary Education Area (TEA):

- Operating independently, so with its own board for the HVPE Institute;
- Operating under the management of a consortium that includes both a HVPE Institute (5 and 6) and a VET College (till 4).

## **4 Partial qualifications within HVPE-A (level 5)**

As stated, the EHEA only works with full qualifications (cycles), in order to achieve a comparable NHEA within a country. As already mentioned, there are now thoughts 'left and right' about formally using micro-credentials, especially when using them to issue certificates for parts of qualifications. Various countries have started working on it, partly depending on the space available, also formally and under the direction of the government. We will have to wait a while for further initiatives within the Bologna process because such innovation takes quite some time.

Because a HVPE Area can be built more or less from scratch, we can see how parts of formal training can be included. These are rewarded with a 'certificate', to have a clear international name. Our main concern is to initially have some kind of framework to map out the position of partial qualifications that lead to a certificate.

We will come back to what is now called a 'micro-credential' in a separate section.

Other documents in this series (3a and 3b) indicate that within a HVPE Area there is considerable differentiation with learning paths, using the levels for HVPE-A and HVPE-B. It was found that the most flexibility can be achieved by using HVPE-A. As a person, you can opt for a direct learning path to HVPE-B. That's fine, but by first obtaining HVPE-A, a lot can still be done afterwards, with or without a view to acquiring a HVPE-B diploma.

For this reason and to keep things clear at the beginning of the process, we will now discuss the use of certificates for non-formal qualifications related to HVPE-A. This also means that we focus on the role in this and the possibilities for a HVPE Institute that provides formal qualifications and, in combination with that, can also focus on offering certificates.

## **5 Study load and credits and certificates and... having the VPC...**

What does the above mean in general (so in principle for all levels) for our design and therefore the framework we have in mind?

- HVPE will emphatically not only and not exclusively concerned with formal qualifications that are based on providing them during several semesters and therefore also years (in full-time, for the average student and learner).
- So from the start, when working with this area, we assume that we will be able to find out how to embed other types of 'sub-qualifications' in it, where necessary and relevant within certain frameworks.
- To indicate the study load of a (full-time) qualification, we want to use our own unit. For higher education the 'EC' or 'Credit' can be used, the European Credit, based on the European Credit

Transfer and Accumulation System. The EC is also used for the SCHE. In another part of this series we suggested using for the HVPE Area: VPC (Vocational-Professional Credit). In order to be able to shape the link to higher education, we have proposed that a full-time year will have 60 VPC (with the study load of a VPC to be determined by a country itself, but with a minimum and maximum like it is the case for the EHEA).

- It should be stated emphatically that a subdivision of a qualification into units and then also having VPC to be linked to such an unit is not always a precondition, in view of being able to work with learning outcomes. In the EHEA that is the case, working with units and credits. It can be agreed for the HVPE Area that it is necessary to have also 'semesters', because of the international cooperation, and of course units and so on.

### **5.1 Different types of qualifications – formal and some other types being non-formal**

There will be different types of qualifications, with their own status. Here an overview.

*Important: This overview includes percentages to define certain qualifications. These percentages are of course not fixed. They serve as examples of how certificates and associated units of formal training can ensure a flexible approach. In the intended process for the HVPE Area, this can provide a framework for further discussions.*

#### **1. Formal qualifications – offered by VET Institutes**

First of all there will be as basis for the 'framework' all those formal qualifications based on 30 VPC per semester and 60 VPC per year – leading to a diploma at level A, B and also C but together with D this level is not taken into account yet here – to be handled in a later stage – and limits are used for them in the international setting.

These qualifications will lead to a 'diploma'.

#### **2. Non-formal qualifications – role of the HVPE Institute – just using HVPE-A**

As previously indicated here, we also want to look at non-formal qualifications and the way in which a HVPE Institute can play a role in this.

It has already been mentioned that to keep things simple at this stage of arriving at a process, we are only talking about non-formal qualifications that belong to HVPE-A.

This means that we will also look at programmes that also reach level 5, but 'something different', so they are 'alternative learning paths'. But that doesn't always have to be the case, as we will show.

We are explicitly talking about non-formal qualifications based on the use of a number of VPC, but they will not have a programme based in all circumstances on having semesters of 30 VPC and thus not always using a full-time setting. They can also be seen as 'narrow' or 'small' qualifications.

We can distinguish two types for these non-formal qualifications, which is quite crucial for our process for the HVPE Area, to distinguish it from the approach within the EHEA with only the formal cycles and associated degrees.

- **Programme in the hands of HVPE-Institute itself - 'certificate awarding power'**

The non-formal programme is mainly based on units of a formal training offered by the HVPE Institute. These can be supplemented with other units that have been specifically designed and completed with the target groups of this qualification in mind, as a form of tailor-made solutions for this purpose.

This is a programme that has a study load that comprises at least 75% of the number of credits linked to HVPE-A in a country, but it can also be 100%. The condition is that the HVPE Institute provides learning outcomes that correspond to level 5.

Furthermore, a minimum of 60% and a maximum of 80% of the self-composed programme consists of a number of units of the formal training. This means that these are units that students can regularly choose within their formal education, at various stages.

With this requirement, the institution has a form of 'certificate awarding power' to develop and offer these types of non-formal qualifications itself on the basis of formal training.

The Institute itself therefore links a number of non-formal units and therefore VPCs to the entire programme. They are units that are strongly focused on specific, narrow and/or business-oriented sub-functions. They can differ per design in order to serve various target

groups, and can therefore also be implemented together with branches, industries, professional associations and other organizations within a professional field in terms of learning outcomes.

The number of VPCs of this type of non-formal qualifications is, as it were, linked to the number of VPCs associated with that formal training. It must be at least half of it and at most equal to the number of the formal training. The explicit condition is that the programme ends at level 5, based on the units of formal training that are introduced.

Anyone who completes the program with satisfactory results will receive a 'certificate'. The supplement lists the units, from the course or developed separately from it, as well as the formal course on which they are based and their level.

It depends on the legislation in a country whether these programs at a publicly funded VPE Institute are fully, partially or not funded at all. It is possible that there is a 'personal learning account' or other budgets.

- **Programme of the HVPE Institute, but linked to the NQF**

The programme is, as above, partly based on formal training, but is designed in such a way that less than 60% of it can be traced back to this. The program comprises a minimum of two units of a formal qualification, covering at least 25% of the relevant non-formal programme. As mentioned above, the programme is supplemented with other learning outcomes that can often be regarded as tailor-made for parts of the labor market.

The difference with the previous non-formal qualification is that the number of VPCs does not necessarily have to be equal to that of the formal training from which all kinds of units have been taken.

It is therefore really a non-formal qualification without it being clear what exactly the final level is and what the study load is in VPC.

In this case, the qualification must be presented to the National Coordination Point (NCP) and be classified there at a level of the NQF. Of course, the fact that the provider is a HVPE Institute plays a role in this, but by including 'new' units it cannot be left to the institute itself to determine the level for the entire programme.

In this case it concerns a private non-formal qualification. It depends on the legislation in the country whether the Institute can offer this itself or whether this must be done by a private partner institution with which the HVPE Institute collaborates by supplying all kinds of things.

Those who successfully complete this qualification will receive a 'certificate'. The units are mentioned in the accompanying supplement. It is stated which units belong to the relevant formal education, with the study load in VPCs.

Both types of qualifications therefore provide a 'certificate'.

### 3. **Single units (one or more)**

A HVPE Institute can then also offer one or more separate units of a formal programme at level 5, i.e. at HVPE-A, in a bundle. A number of VPCs are associated with this, based on the embedding in the formal programme.

This means that a unit or a bundle of units has demonstrable relevance for the labour market. Each of these units is a private non-formal qualification, if permitted, offered by the HVPE Institute or by a partner institution.

This qualification produces a 'unit certificate' per unit of the training. A bundle of units is also a bundle of unit certificates.

In the supplement, each unit states which formal training it concerns and its level, so in this case it is level 5 (HVPE-A).

We will not go into this specifically, but it will of course be possible to work with bundles of units from different HVPE courses. This may include specific 'crossovers'. In many positions in the field it can be seen that the activities also have similar forms and in such a case a combination can be effective.

#### 4. Small qualifications

And then there will be other (smaller and tailor-made) non-formal qualifications that only work with trajectories without applying a study load based on the VPC. They can be offered by those institutions that are also involved in the first three categories of qualifications. It can also be stated what the value and its civil effect are when it comes to units of such a qualification or independent units of which it is possible to estimate the two levels between which the learning outcomes lie.

There is an overlap for this type of non-formal qualifications within the sector BPET. Later more about this.

This summary refers to a 'unit' as part of a formal program, with a certain number of VPCs as a study load. The programme is adjusted every year, with possible consequences for units: updated, disappeared, enlarged or reduced. This means that every supplement to a diploma, certificate or unit certificate must explicitly state which training course is referred to and the underlying program.

This approach relies on the status of the HVPE Institute and the quality of the formal training courses. If the training remains close, even in a form that is seen as non-formal, the institution itself can maintain control - i.e. with the 'certificate awarding power'. This also applies to non-formal qualifications, the level of which is formally determined by the NCP of the NQF, i.e. if the HVPE Area is between levels 4 and 5.

Then it is also good, to be on the safe side, to note that a HVPE Institute may itself add units to such a qualification, with formulated learning outcomes and the number of VPCs. That is also part of that 'power', based on the confidence that people have in the Institute.

#### 5.2 Overview in a table

The amount of VPCs for the various options is translated schematically below and stated in the table.

Qualifications offered... Based on a formal qualification at level 5 (VPE-A)		
Status	Number or Range in VPCs	Comments
Formal	A: 90 – 120 <i>At level 5</i>	Amount of VPCs depending of the national system <i>Diploma</i>
Non-formal	At least 60% and at the most 80% of the units of a formal qualification plus other units, having 75 till 100% of the study load in VPCs compared to that qualification <i>At level 5</i>	Offered by the Institute as part of a 'certificate awarding power' – at the same level as the formal qualification  <i>Certificate</i>
Non-formal	Less than 60% of the units of a formal qualification, with at least two units of that programme, having less than 75% of the study load in VPCs compared to that qualification <i>linked by the NCP to a level of the NQF (4 or 5)</i>	Private, stand-alone – maybe offered by a partner-institution  <i>Certificate</i>
Non-formal	Stand-alone unit(s) – <i>part of a formal programme</i>	Private, stand-alone <i>Unit Certificate</i>
Non-formal	Part of the BPET sector	Whether or not these types of qualifications can be offered privately depends on the formal legislation in a country. <i>BP Certificate</i>

#### 5.3 Providers

In principle, there are many providers of qualifications in a country, mainly non-formal. The vast majority operate in a private market, for individuals, companies, networks and the like, and people

simply pay for it. But government-funded institutions can also provide non-formal qualifications under certain conditions, and privately if the legislation allows this. They can also collaborate with a private institution to give qualifications a form of labour market relevance. This means that it concerns a collaboration in which a HVPE Institute is a partner and has a clear substantive contribution.

### **5.3.1 Funded and private within the HVPE Area**

In this document and the intended process we assume the situation in which HVPE Institutes are also involved in providing and offering certain types of non-formal qualifications, as classified and explained above (and which we will discuss further later).

This may concern HVPE Institutes that are funded by the government, completely private financed or a certain mix of these. In the latter case, there are national laws and regulations that determine which conditions are linked to that construction. These are often not always clear and completely consistent, which can cause confusion. Within the HVPE Area, it would therefore be good to come up with transparent formats within the intended process from the start here at an international level so that in the event that HVPE Institutes collaborate internationally, funded by the government and/or privately designed, it is clear what is or is not possible with regard to the constructions.

In the further elaboration in this document, we assume a HVPE Institute without going further into the formal status.

### **5.4 Different lengths (study loads) for HVPE and formal qualifications**

As indicated above, it is not the intention to make standard agreements for the HVPE Area for the length of a formal training course for the various levels. This did not happen in the EHEA for the four formal cycles either. This is partly the case in order to be able to take into account nationally the previous education and its length, the specific design of a course, the number of learning outcomes and competences associated with certain professions and functions and other circumstances that can lead to various amounts of study load.

However, for international comparability it is useful to work with bandwidths for formal qualifications at levels 5 and higher.

As previously suggested, within the framework of this document it is good to first limit ourselves to levels 5 (diploma A) and level 6 (diploma B). The other levels will be discussed later,

This is further elaborated in document 3b, with a proposal that will be one of the first points of discussion within the intended HVPE process. This concerns the bandwidths for diplomas A and B, from the start of the HVPE Area, but also the option to continue after A for B, with two scenarios described in document 3b.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Bandwidth in VPC</b>
A	90 – 120
B (after A)	Additional – in total to within the bandwidth 180 -240
B (direct)	180 – 240

## **6 Studying for a certificate / dropout**

There may be all kinds of reasons to start learning, by following a (narrow or less extensive) programme that leads to a 'certificate'. It often involves acquiring a specific bundle of competences (and therefore learning outcomes), in order to be able to use them directly in a concrete situation, with a clear relevance to the labour market. This is often different from completing a full course of study for a formal diploma.

In addition, the option whereby someone takes a full qualification but stops studying at some point for one reason or another will soon have to be discussed. The institution can issue a 'study statement' stating which units of the course have been completed with a positive result. Such a statement can easily be used at a later stage to obtain exemptions, when a training course is started again.

It is often stated that it should always be possible to issue a certificate per educational unit, together with the study declaration. To us, this only seems sensible and justifiable if this educational unit in itself is relevant to the labour market. Or that a set of educational units as such has that relevance

in a demonstrable way. This can then be stated in the study declaration as additional information. In other words, the status and value of a certificate can be protected in this way.

We did indicate in the previous paragraph that people only want to follow certain educational units without relevance, for a 'unit certificate'. We will come back to this in another document, together with a general discussion of micro-credentials.

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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...