

# European Inventory on NQF 2012

## FRANCE

### Introduction

The setting up, in 2002, of the National Committee for Professional Certification (CNCP) and the national register of vocational qualifications (RNCP) signals the establishment of the French national qualifications framework. Supported by the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*), the French framework can be seen as belonging to the first generation of European qualifications frameworks. While more limited in scope than the new comprehensive NQFs now developing throughout Europe, in its focus on vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, its regulatory role is strong and well established.

A number of stakeholders consider the existing five-level structure dating back to 1969 to be in need of replacement, possibly by an eight-level structure more closely aligned with the EQF. This discussion has now been going on for a number of years, notably since 2009 when a note on the issue was submitted to the office of the Prime Minister. Partly due to the change of government in 2012, this reform has been further delayed and it is, for the moment, unclear when a new structure could be put in place.

The framework was referenced to the EQF in October 2010, using the original five-level structure as reference point. A new referencing report will be submitted as soon as a revised structure is in place, possibly in the next one to two years.

### Main policy objectives

The French NQF, as defined by the RNCP, covers all vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, including all higher education qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose <sup>(1)</sup>. The framework covers three main types of qualification:

- those awarded by French ministries (in cooperation with the social partners through a CPC);
- those awarded by training providers, chambers and ministries but where no CPC is in place;
- those set up and awarded by social partners under their own responsibility.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The RNCP currently covers more than 6 000 qualifications published (in the Official Journal) certificate (qualifications) 'fiches'; 1 260 of these are 'old' certificates not awarded any more. By October 2012, certificates in higher education grades are as follows: 870 masters have been published, 323 titres d'ingénieurs (grade of master), 160 licences generales (grade of bachelor), 1 523 licences professionnelles grade of professional bachelors), 1 280 level 5 EQF (including higher education short cycles), 117 brevet de technicien supérieur (BTS), (in 2011) 29 BTSA (same thing in the field of agriculture), (in 2011) 43 DUT (diplomes universitaires technologiques).

To be registered in the RNCP, a qualification should meet a number of requirements; aiming at national coherence and strengthening the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. All qualifications registered in the RNCP must be possible to acquire through validation of non-formal and informal learning. Registration signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the CNCP, underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary for:

- receiving funding;
- financing validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- exercising certain professions and occupations;
- entering apprenticeship schemes.

The French NQF has more limited scope than the comprehensive NQFs now being developed throughout Europe. Its focus is strictly on vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications and it does not include certain qualifications from general education, notably primary and lower secondary education (>16) and general upper secondary qualifications (the General *Baccalaureate*).

The French NQF is defined by its labour market focus. The framework responds to a situation where students increasingly find themselves without jobs after finishing education and training. Recent policy initiatives and reforms have emphasised the need to give higher priority to employability and having candidates better suited to the labour market. Universities have therefore been obliged to reformulate and clarify their qualifications also in terms of labour market relevance, in effect obliging them to use the same qualifications descriptors (skills, knowledge, competence) as other areas of education and training. This movement towards employability, and the obligations of universities to adapt, has been present in French policies since 2006.

This also means that, while the learning outcomes approach is now increasingly being implemented for the qualifications forming part of the responsibility of the CNCP, this principle is only to a very limited extent applied for general education at primary, lower and upper secondary level.

## Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

Belonging to the first generation of European frameworks, the French NQF is fully implemented and operational. It is a regulatory framework playing a key role in the overall governance of education and training systems, in particular as regards vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications. While emphasising the importance of transparency (for example by integrating the Europass tools), the framework directly influences access and progression in the system as well as funding and quality assurance issues. The number of qualifications covered by the CNCP has been steadily increasing in recent years.. A significant part of this growth was caused by vocationally and professionally oriented higher education qualifications, notably at EQF levels 5 and 6.

The CNCP (which is also an EQF NCP) is a platform for cooperation between all ministries involved in design and award of qualifications (Ministries of Education, Higher Education, Labour, Social Affairs, Agriculture, Culture, Youth and Sports, Defence, Finance)

and for the social partners and other relevant stakeholders (chambers, etc.) in coordinating the French qualifications system and framework. This broad involvement is seen as necessary (both for technical and administrative reasons) to capture the diversity of qualifications in France, but also for reasons of credibility and ownership. CNCP is also entitled to be informed about any vocational qualification created by social partners, even in cases where there is no intention to register them in the national register.

The role of the CNCP as the 'gatekeeper' of the French framework is important. No qualification can be included in the official register without the approval of the CNCP. The strength of the CNCP lies in its openness to public and private providers and awarding institutions. The procedures and criteria developed and applied by the CNCP for this purpose are of particular interest to those countries currently in the process of implementing new (and open) NQFs. Any institution (public or private) wanting to register a qualification must respond to the following main issues:

- legal basis of the body (or network of bodies) awarding the qualification;
- indication of procedures if the awarding institution discontinues its activity;
- description of tasks addressed by the qualification;
- link to ROME;
- the competences (learning outcomes) related to these tasks;
- competences (learning outcomes) to be assessed;
- mode of assessment;
- relationship to existing qualifications in France and abroad;
- composition of the assessment jury;
- link to validation.

The French experiences since 2002 illustrate the need for NQFs to evolve continuously to stay relevant. One of the issues currently being addressed is the question of opening up to the development of qualifications at what would correspond to EQF level 2. Until now there has been agreement between public authorities and social partners that vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications (falling within the mandate of the CNCP) should only be developed and awarded from level 3 and upwards. This position has been defended by the trade unions in particular, fearing that an opening up to vocational qualifications at lower levels could threaten existing labour market agreements. The current crisis in the economy, with increasing youth unemployment, may lead to reconsideration of this approach. Technical work continues, looking at possible competence requirements for level 2 qualifications, using the experience of neighbouring countries like Luxembourg and Germany as reference point. It is expected that progress will be made in 2013, reflecting the current urgency attributed to this question.

## Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The original five-level structure introduced in 1969 was used as the basis for referencing the French framework to the EQF in 2010.

The French qualification system has developed considerably since these levels were agreed in 1969 so the development and introduction of a more detailed structure of level

descriptors is seen as necessary. In 2011, the national council on statistics (CNIS) commented on the need for a new level structure (CNCP, 2010) <sup>(2)</sup> by stressing that it ‘...would like to see these reflections lead to a new classification of certifications that take into account changes in the structure of qualifications and the links set up within European higher education.’

Although it is likely that a seven or eight-level structure will be chosen (based on technical work carried out so far), it is now unclear when a new draft structure could be presented. A particular issue is how the new structure will link to occupational standards, notably the national ROME and the international ISCO. The discussion is also closely related to the question of whether qualifications corresponding to EQF levels 1 and 2 will play any role in the future. This latter question is linked to labour agreements and negotiations on minimum wages and is particularly complicated.

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<sup>(2)</sup> *Referencing of the national framework of French certification in the light of the European framework of certification for lifelong learning.* <http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/uploads/file/Report-FR-NQF-EQF-VF.pdf>  
[accessed 5.12.2012].

Table **Levels in the French national qualifications framework**

Level	Level definition	Learning outcomes
V	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational studies certificate (BEP) or the certificate of vocational ability (CAP), and by assimilation, the level 1 certificate of vocational training for adults (CFPA).	This level corresponds to full qualification for carrying out a specific activity with the ability to use the corresponding instruments and techniques. This activity mainly concerns execution work, which can be autonomous within the limits of the techniques involved.
IV	Personnel holding jobs at a supervisory highly skilled worker level and able to provide proof of a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational certificate (BP), technical certificate (BT), vocational <i>baccalaureate</i> or technological <i>baccalaureate</i> .	A level 4 qualification involves a higher level of theoretical knowledge than the previous level. This activity concerns mainly technical work that can be executed autonomously and/or involve supervisory and coordination responsibilities.
III	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of a diploma from a University Institute of Technology (DUT) or a technology certificate (BTS) or a certificate corresponding to the end of the first higher education cycle.	A level 3 qualification corresponds to higher levels of knowledge and abilities, but without involving mastery of the fundamental scientific principles for the fields concerned. The knowledge and abilities required enable the person concerned to assume, autonomously or independently, responsibilities in design and/or supervision and/or management.
II	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training comparable to that of a bachelor or master's degree.	At this level, exercise of a salaried or independent vocational activity involves mastery of the fundamental scientific principles for the profession, generally leading to autonomy in exercising that activity.
I	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training above that of a master's degree.	As well as confirmed knowledge of the fundamental scientific principles for a vocational activity, a level 1 qualification requires mastery of design or research processes.

In contrast to the use (to now) of the 1969 level structure as a basis for the French framework, there is a common policy on learning outcomes (expressed as 'competence') covering the entire (vocationally and professionally oriented) education and training system. This approach is broadly accepted within initial vocational education and training and gradually so by institutions operating at higher levels of education and training. The

approach was strengthened by the 2002 Law on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VAE) and its emphasis on learning outcomes as the basis for awarding any kind of certified qualification.

The learning outcomes approach has only been partially introduced in higher education. Traditionally, university qualifications have been input-based and very much focused on the knowledge and research aspect. The new law of August 2009 (*Loi sur les responsabilités et libertés des universités*) creates the obligation for universities to set new services dedicated to employability. This law requires universities to improve their learning outcomes descriptions, both for employers and students.

The learning outcomes descriptions form the basis on which higher education qualifications are approved by the CNCPE, a process which has to be renewed every four years. The Ministry of Higher Education has now (September 2012) issued <sup>(3)</sup> detailed criteria for writing learning outcomes for bachelor level (licences) divided into the following main areas:

- common generic competence;
- pre-professional competences;
- transferable competences;
- specific competences related to broad, disciplinary subject areas.

There are also many interuniversity teams working on learning outcomes with the triple purpose of helping the implementation of the VAE, the registration of degrees in the RNCP, and employability of students. A systematic effort is now being made to support the introduction and use of a learning outcomes-based perspective, in particular addressing higher education. A nationwide process was initiated in 2009-10 and regional meetings have been/are being held explaining the rationale behind the learning outcomes approach.

Initial vocational qualifications are defined according to the same logic as for higher education qualifications, in terms of skills, knowledge and competences. There are different forms of VET provision though, influencing the way learning outcomes are assessed, following four main approaches:

- qualifications based on training modules, the learning outcomes of each module being assessed separately;
- qualifications based on a two-block approach, theory and practical experience, the learning outcomes of the two blocks being assessed separately;
- qualifications linked to a single, coherent block of learning outcomes/ competences requiring a holistic approach to assessment of learning outcomes;
- qualifications based on units of learning outcomes, which can be assessed separately, and capitalised independently of any kind of learning process.

All four operate using a learning outcomes/competence-based approach, though in different ways.

The emphasis given to transparency is demonstrated by the way the French NQF actively uses the Europass certificate supplement. This format is seen as important for transparency reasons and as relevant at all levels, including higher education. The

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<sup>(3)</sup> Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, 16 July 2012.

supplement has been strengthened as regards competence/learning outcomes. The main focus is on the three descriptor elements – knowledge, skills and competences – but the link to quality assurance and to validation of non-formal and informal learning is also addressed by the framework.

## Links to other instruments and policies

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is treated as an integrated part of the French NQF and any qualification approved by the CNCP must be possible to acquire also on the basis of validation of experiences. The extensive use of validation, both for access and exemption, can be seen as an effort to build bridges between education and employment and as a key element in promoting lifelong and life-wide learning. The centrality of validation in the French approach explains the relatively low priority given to the use of credit systems in France, illustrated by the moderate implementation of ECTS and ECVET.

## Referencing to the EQF

Work on referencing to the EQF has been going on since 2006 and a (preliminary) referencing report was presented to the EQF AG in October 2010. From the start the referencing process involved all ministries, social partners and other stakeholders (represented in the CNCP). The referencing work was also supported by the EQF test and pilot projects, notably the Leonardo da Vinci Net-testing project. The result of the referencing can be seen in the following table:

Table **Level correspondence established between the French qualifications framework and the EQF**

French 5-level structure	EQF
I – Doctorate grade	8
I – Master grade	7
II – Bachelor grade	6
III	5
IV	4
V	3
Not applicable	2
Not applicable	1

The referencing table shows the limitations of the five-level structure in terms of specificity and ability to reflect the diversity of qualifications covered by the French framework. This is exemplified by level 1 (highest) which covers both master and doctorate, and by level 5 (lowest) which covers all initial qualifications.

The (lack) of lower level vocational/professional qualifications has posed a particular challenge. Looking at the qualifications covered by the current level 5, it could be argued (from learning outcomes) that this broad category of qualifications covers both levels 2 and 3 of the EQF. A political decision has been made, however, to refer all these qualifications to level 3 of the EQF. Several of the countries represented in the EQF AG expressed some concern regarding this decision. Members of the advisory group argued that the non-existence of lower level qualifications in the French framework (in a worst case scenario) could prevent migrants holding qualifications at EQF level 1 or 2 from entering the French labour market, given that equivalents officially do not exist in the French system. Debate on this issue is now also evident at national level in France.

The timing for the presentation of an updated referencing report to the EQF AG is now uncertain and will depend on the revision of the level-structure and possibly on clarification of how to deal with the lower levels of vocational/professional qualifications.

## Important lessons and the way forward

The French NQF operates with less clear distinction between VET and higher education than many other European countries. This signals a wish to promote vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications at all levels. Since the 1970s, vocational courses and programmes have been an important and integrated part of traditional universities and professional bachelor and master degrees are common. Outside universities we find specialist technical and vocational schools offering courses and certificates at a high level. These schools are run by different ministries covering their respective subject areas (agriculture, health, etc.), or by chambers of commerce and industry. *Ingénieurs* from these institutions or students in business schools hold qualifications at a high level, equivalent to those from universities with a master degree. The Ministry of Higher Education delivers the bachelor and master degrees and recognises the diplomas. This has an integrating effect on the diplomas awarded by other ministries such as culture or industry.

In reality, the situation is less clear-cut. As the French qualifications framework is currently defined by those qualifications registered in the RNCP, important general education qualifications are left outside the framework. Compared to other European countries, addressing both professional and general qualifications, the integrating function and role of the French framework is lessened, in particular as a key-qualification like the general Baccalaureate is kept outside the framework.

The introduction of a new level structure to replace the 1969 structure could help to move the French NQF further forward and strengthen comparability to other European NQFs.

### Main sources of information

Information is available on the website of the National Committee for Professional Certification (CNCP). <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr> [accessed 6.12.2012].