

BULGARIA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Bulgaria has recently improved its performance as regards basic skills and tertiary education attainment. However, it still needs to improve the overall quality and efficiency of its school education system and the capacity of higher education to respond to labour market needs ⁽¹⁾.

To ensure the quality and effectiveness of vocational education and training, and in an effort to support reform in the Bulgarian education system, the council of ministers decided to adopt the Bulgarian national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (BQF) in 2012.

The BQF is a single, comprehensive, eight-level framework with an additional preparatory level 0. It includes qualifications from all levels and subsystems of formal education and training, including pre-primary education: two years of pre-school education before first grade is mandatory. It encompasses pre-primary, primary and secondary general education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.

Amendments to national legislation are foreseen to support implementation of the framework. A new pre-school and school education bill was adopted in late 2015 and will lead to amendment of the BQF at secondary education levels, providing a legal definition of 'learning outcomes'; a working group is to be established, tasked with prepare the amendments.

Two bills amending and supplementing the Law on vocational training ⁽²⁾ further support the BQF, with legal arrangements for validation of non-formal and

⁽¹⁾ General government expenditure on education as a share of GDP (3.8% in 2013) has slightly increased over recent years but remains well below the EU average of 5.0% and is the second lowest in the EU-28. The participation of upper secondary students in vocational education and training (VET) is above the EU average (52.4% in 2013, compared to the EU average of 48.9). The employment rate of recent upper secondary graduates is also well below the EU average. *Source: Education and training Monitor (2015) Bulgaria.*

⁽²⁾ (a) Bill amending and supplementing the Law on vocational education and training; registration number: 354-01-76; the bill is available in Bulgarian language at the National Assembly's website: <http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-76.pdf> [last accessed on 6.9.2016].

independent [informal] learning, for learning outcomes units, and for introduction of the VET credits accumulation and transfer system.

The BQF was referenced to the European qualifications framework (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013) and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in mid-2013.

Policy objectives

The overall objective of developing and introducing a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) compatible with the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the QF-EHEA is to make Bulgarian education system levels clearer and easier to understand by describing them in terms of learning outcomes. This will also improve understanding of national qualifications among target groups and stakeholders. It is hoped that this will raise trust in education and training and make mobility and recognition of qualifications easier. More specific aims addressed by BQF development are to:

- (a) develop a device with translation and bridging functions;
- (b) promote mobility within education and in the labour market;
- (c) promote learning-outcomes orientation of qualifications;
- (d) support validation of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning;
- (e) strengthen orientation towards a lifelong learning approach;
- (f) increase cooperation between stakeholders ⁽³⁾.

Apart from offering transparency, the BQF is seen as an enabler – rather than a driver – of wider reform, with implications for setting up a system for validating non-formal learning, improving education quality, modernising curricula and strengthening provider accountability.

(b) Bill amending and supplementing the Law on Vocational Education and Training; registration number: 354-01-88; the bill is available in Bulgarian language at the National Assembly's website: <http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-88.pdf> [last accessed on 6.9.2016].

⁽³⁾ Bulgarian, Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (2013). *Referencing the NQF of the Republic of Bulgaria to the EQF and to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area* [unpublished].

Systematic and coherent lifelong learning policies have largely been lacking in Bulgaria; adult participation in lifelong learning is the second lowest in the EU, significantly below the EU average (1.8% in 2014, compared to the EU average of 10.7%) ⁽⁴⁾. The BQF aims to play an important role in supporting lifelong learning, in promoting adult learning, and modernising vocational education and training.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The BQF comprises eight levels and an additional preparatory level (BQF level 'zero', covering pre-school education). Level descriptors take into account EQF and QF-EHEA descriptors. All levels are described in terms of knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills described as cognitive (use of logical and creative thinking) and practical (manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments), and competences. Descriptors distinguish between personal and professional competences. They include autonomy and responsibility, and key elements such as learning competences, communicative and social competences are also emphasised. Learning-outcomes-based qualification levels are expected to give learning outcomes a more prominent role in planning education provision. This is especially the case for development of VET standards divided into units of learning outcomes.

Specified learning outcomes at the qualification levels reflect the legal acts governing different subsystems of education and training, as well as State education requirements for contents and expected learning outcomes in the national education system (general and VET) and in higher education.

The national strategy for lifelong learning for the period 2008-13 ⁽⁵⁾ does not only provide definition of the term 'learning outcomes'; one of its priorities (along with vocational training, key competences and recognition of qualifications) is 'assessment of learning outcomes'. Learning outcomes (in Bulgarian, *результати от учене*) are defined as 'acquired knowledge and skills as a result

⁽⁴⁾ European Commission (2015). *Education and training monitor 2015: Bulgaria*.

⁽⁵⁾ National strategy for lifelong learning for the period 2008-13 (in Bulgarian: *Национална стратегия за учене през целия живот за периода 2008-13*), adopted by the Council of Ministers on 30.10.2008; the national strategy is available in Bulgarian language at <http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=690> [last accessed on 21.3.2014].

of formal, non-formal and independent (informal) learning' ⁽⁶⁾. In January 2014, the Council of Ministers adopted the new national strategy for lifelong learning (for 2014-20) ⁽⁷⁾ which addresses the challenges in all forms of education, training and learning – formal, non-formal, independent [informal] –which an individual could undertake throughout his life. The new national strategy for lifelong learning, like the previous one, provides explanation of the phrase 'learning outcomes' and contains a definition of the term 'Learning outcome units' (in Bulgarian: *единици учебни резултати*) ⁽⁸⁾, which is understood as 'a component of qualification, consisting of coherent set of knowledge, skills and competences, which could be assessed and validated through a certain number of credit points, linked to them' ⁽⁹⁾. As a whole, the term 'learning outcomes' is widely used in the strategy.

Although the phrase 'learning outcomes' is not so widespread in policy documents on general education, it is used or referred to in national curriculum, assessment and examination documents, particularly in State educational requirements. However, an action plan for implementing the approach has not been adopted nor discussed in the country. The current position in the various subsystems shows that implementation of the approach has continued in the new State educational standards adopted after the new law on pre-school and school education entered into force. It is also in the new State educational requirements on acquisition of higher education in regulated professions, adopted after the BQF entered into force.

⁽⁶⁾ National strategy for lifelong learning for 2008-13, p. 34.

⁽⁷⁾ National strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20 (in Bulgarian: *Национална стратегия за учене през целия живот за периода 2014-20*), adopted by the Council of Ministers on 10.1.2014; the national strategy is available in Bulgarian language at <http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=4297> [last accessed on 21.3.2014].

⁽⁸⁾ Note that there is a slight difference between the terminology used for 'learning outcomes units' in the *Bill amending and supplementing the Law on vocational education and training* and that used in the National strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20. In the former the wording is "единици резултати от ученето", whereas in the latter it is "единици учебни резултати".

⁽⁹⁾ National strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20, Chapter 5. Glossary of main terms (in Bulgarian: 5. Речник на основните понятия), p. 62; in Bulgarian: *Единици учебни резултати - Компонент от квалификация, състоящ се от съгласуван пакет от знания, умения и компетентности, които могат да бъдат оценени и валидирани с помощта на определен брой свързани с тях кредитни точки.*

Two bills amending the law on VET introduce the term and propose a legal definition of it. State educational standards ⁽¹⁰⁾ and examination programmes, especially those for acquiring vocational qualification, have been updated (or new ones developed), to describe or to refer to learning outcomes. This update is a prerequisite for implementing the validation procedure and awarding of credits.

Higher education institutions are autonomous and responsible for developing curriculum, assessment and examination rules, and some have learning outcomes within study programmes, so implementation differs from one institution to another. The New Bulgarian University is an example of an institution using learning outcomes in its study programmes ⁽¹¹⁾. The Burgas Free University also uses learning outcomes in some of its master programme courses ⁽¹²⁾. However, there is no systematic approach for implementing a learning outcome approach in higher education. According to a recent Cedefop study ⁽¹³⁾, the law on higher education in Bulgaria ⁽¹⁴⁾ which governs accreditation of universities, does not stress the importance of learning outcomes for the accreditation process.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria coordinated and led drafting of the BQF and is now coordinating its implementation. National coordination point (NCP) responsibilities lie with the International and European Cooperation Directorate in this ministry. All staff are on permanent contracts as State officials. A new working group will be set up in near future, to prepare

⁽¹⁰⁾ The term 'standard' has been adopted instead of the term 'requirement' since 1 August 2016 with the new law for school and preschool education.

⁽¹¹⁾ New Bulgarian University, e-catalogue:
http://ecatalog.nbu.bg/Default.asp?V_Year=2013 [last accessed on 15.11.2016].

⁽¹²⁾ Burgas Free University, Master programmes, website:
<http://www.bfu.bg/index.php?q=node/1793> [last accessed on 15.11.2016].

⁽¹³⁾ Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study*. http://bookshop.europa.eu/is-bin/INTERSHOP.enfinity/WFS/EU-Bookshop-Site/en_GB/-/EUR/ViewPublication-Start?PublicationKey=TIRF16001

⁽¹⁴⁾ Law on higher education (in Bulgarian: *Закон за висшето образование*); Promulgated: *State Gazette* No112/27.12.1995; Last amendment: *State Gazette* No 101/22.11.2013; the act is available in Bulgarian at <http://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2133647361> [last accessed on 15.11.2016].

amendments to the BQF at secondary education levels. Responsible for maintaining and updating the BQF, the group will comprise representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science along with other relevant stakeholders, including social partners and employer and employee organisations. Although there is active participation by stakeholders in elaborating the new draft projects of State educational standards and requirements, there is a need for stronger cooperation and sufficient experience (in methods of cooperation) among them.

The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) management board, as well as experts at NAVET, are permanently involved in developing and updating the list of qualifications for VET, which is integrated in BQF.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁵⁾

Bulgaria does not have an overall national strategy or policy on validation of non-formal learning to encompass all educational sectors. Other grassroots initiatives have been either recently launched, are little known or still do not have results. It was only in 2014 that the VET Act was amended aiming to introduce the legislative basis for validation of prior learning in VET and 2015 that the ordinance on the conditions for validation entered into force. ⁽¹⁶⁾ The time period between 2014/15 and 2016 was too narrow for many initiatives to begin.

Procedures were developed through the project *System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences (2013-15): new opportunity for my future* implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, other relevant ministries and social partners ⁽¹⁷⁾. National employers'

⁽¹⁵⁾ This section draws mainly on input from 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Ordinance No 2 on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, State Gazette No 96 /2014:
http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/N2_Validirane_21_11_14.pdf
[accessed 11.2.2016].

⁽¹⁷⁾ Partners include the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Ministry of Justice, Public Employment Agency, Bulgarian Industrial Association, Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Confederation of Labour *Podkrepa* (see European Commission et al., 2014).

organisations (such as the Bulgarian Industrial Association, Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association) and employees' organisations (the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria and Confederation of Labour, *Podkrepa*) were partners in this project. They contributed to developing internal quality assurance mechanisms related to assessing evidence of previous learning.

Adoption of the BQF, presenting detailed descriptions of learning outcomes in line with State educational requirements (SER) ⁽¹⁸⁾, will promote possibilities to implement validation of non-formal and informal learning. Through the update of the SERs, Bulgaria is gradually introducing the learning outcomes approach in curricula and assessment. The use of (units of) learning outcomes supports validation of non-formal and informal learning so validation practitioners may have to take specialised training on learning-outcomes-based assessment and may have to rewrite (and update) the SERs by professions.

In VET, where validation is currently possible, SER are the standards used; in higher education, institutions are autonomous and have their own standards for validation and recognition. These should be in line with the SER on acquisition of higher education at bachelor, master and professional bachelor degree levels; they should also feature on the SER of university education acquired in foreign higher education institutions, and of periods of studies completed at such establishments. Some aspects of validation (such as awarding credit units and access to higher education) are covered by the Higher Education Act, although validation practices are not broadly used.

Bulgaria has no overall quality assurance framework for validating formal and non-formal learning. In 2015, Ordinance No 01-845 for quality assurance in VET was adopted ⁽¹⁹⁾: in this established rules, requirements and quality assurance criteria for VET provider activities (including validation) are described. The *New opportunity for my future* project has made a valuable contribution to the development of internal quality assurance measures. Special training has been provided to validation practitioners to aid their ability to compare learning outcomes acquired through non-formal or informal learning with learning outcomes defined for certain vocational qualifications.

⁽¹⁸⁾ The term 'State educational requirements' is changed with the Preschool and School Education Act (2015) into the 'State educational standards'. The term will be changed in VETA also, but SER is still in use.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Ordinance No 01-845 of 19 October 2015:
<http://www.mlsp.government.bg/index.php?section=POLICIES&l=250&lang>

NQF implementation

The qualifications framework is firmly based on national legislation and was adopted by the Council of Ministers (Decision No 96) ⁽²⁰⁾. It is not yet operational. The referencing report was adopted by the Minister for Education and Science in March 2014, paving the way for implementation, but action has been delayed. The BQF, as proposed for referencing, is a classification framework: its future reforming role to support development and revision of qualifications and quality assurance arrangements is acknowledged. The BQF will be embedded in wider educational reforms; legislative changes will be introduced to strengthen BQF implementation and curricula and provision will be modernised. On completion of the referencing process, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents will be referenced to the relevant BQF level, linked to the corresponding EQF level in accordance with Article 141 of the law for preschool and school education ⁽²¹⁾.

Beyond this, information on actual implementation is sparse. Public awareness events will be launched again after the draft proposal for amendment of the BQF is ready for public discussions. One explicit aim is to support lifelong learning. Currently, the BQF comprises all educational stages and all levels of education (from pre-school to doctoral level); it can be regarded as a comprehensive framework. However, it is restricted to qualifications from formal education and training; levels 6 to 8 are limited to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions. The question arises of how open or closed the framework will be; what role will it play in supporting lifelong learning, access, progression and participation (especially of adults)? Will it be open to qualifications acquired outside the formal education system in the course of lifelong learning? Will it become a tool for recognition of lifelong learning achievements?

A proposal for an integrated national qualification register was developed. Currently, registers for school education certificates ⁽²²⁾ issued by the centres for vocational training of adults ⁽²³⁾ and higher education diplomas ⁽²⁴⁾ are in place.

⁽²⁰⁾ Council of Ministers' Decision No 96 of 2 February 2012 on the adoption of the national qualifications framework of the Republic of Bulgaria.

⁽²¹⁾ Law on pre-school and school education, State Gazette No 79/2015.
<http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=8245> (in Bulgarian), [accessed 23.2.2017].

⁽²²⁾ <https://www2.mon.bg/AdminRD/mon/>

Referencing to the EQF

Bulgaria delivered a joint referencing report in early 2013, referencing the BQF to the EQF and the QF-EHEA. The report describes the national education and training system, quality assurance and quality systems for all education levels, and how the BQF and adjoining development processes and responsibilities meet the 10 referencing criteria. Outcome descriptors of BQF levels are generally more detailed than those in the EQF, with key competences such as learning competences, communicative and social competences taken into consideration.

The BQF includes a level 'zero', which is a preparatory level of pre-school education before first grade. It has no corresponding level in the EQF, but is included in the BQF to encompass the entire education system.

VET can start quite early (at age of 13) and is spread over four levels in the BQF (levels 2 to 5), starting with the 'first level' of a vocational qualification placed at level 2, along with the basic education certificate. Levels 3 and 4 comprise lower and upper secondary stages and include the 'second and third level' of a vocational qualification, along with general education. Level 5 comprises VET only; the 'fourth level' of a vocational qualification is placed here. This is the most advanced (post-secondary) vocational qualification. Levels 6-8 relate to qualifications obtained in higher education – bachelor, master and doctor degrees. Each level corresponds to the relevant level of the EQF.

Important lessons and future plans

The NQF aims to increase transparency in education and training and aid knowledge and skills transfer, improving labour force mobility. Level descriptors defined in learning outcomes aim to provide a reference point and common language for diverse qualifications from different education subsystems. By referring to educational levels and State educational requirements, the BQF has been given a strong input orientation. It is expected, however, that learning-outcomes-based level descriptors will play an important role in supporting dialogue and that discussion among stakeholders will strengthen the learning-outcomes dimension in qualifications design.

⁽²³⁾ <http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/registar-na-izdadenite-dokumenti/>

⁽²⁴⁾ <http://89.252.196.217/AdminRHE2/>

The framework can play an important role, but only if it is part of a wider strategic policy resulting in necessary reform and institutional regulations. The recently adopted Pre-school and School Education Bill, the Higher Education Act ⁽²⁵⁾ and amendments to the VET Act ⁽²⁶⁾ will feed into these developments.

Although it is an explicit aim of BQF work to strengthen orientation towards a lifelong learning approach, it remains a challenge that lifelong learning aspects are inadequately focused. There is little information so far on system flexibility and the conditions and role of the framework for promoting lifelong learning and supporting access, progression and adult participation.

Future plans include necessary legislative changes, modernisation of curricula in schools and higher education, and promotional activities. Implementing the BQF at institutional level is seen as a major challenge, particularly by higher education institutions. To support this development, a string of capacity building seminars were held in late 2015.

Stakeholders (including State institutions) in some economic sectors have recently started discussions regarding all sectoral qualifications on levels 2 to 7 from BQF: labour market needs, current possibilities, horizontal and vertical permeability (IT, machinery, transport). This might be perceived as a step towards development of a sectoral qualifications framework.

⁽²⁵⁾ Higher education act, State Gazette No 112/27.12.1995, last amended SG No107/2014, <http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=39> (in Bulgarian), [accessed 23.2.2017].

⁽²⁶⁾ Vocational Education and Training Act, State Gazette No 68/30.7.1999, last amended SG No 61/2014, <http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=38>, (in Bulgarian), [accessed 23.2.2017].

Further sources of information:

The Bulgarian referencing report to the EQF (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (2013)) [unpublished].

The International and European Cooperation Directorate in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science is designated as the EQF national coordination point:
<http://www.mon.bg>

Bulgarian qualifications framework (BQF)

NQF levels	BQF	EQF levels
8	Doctor degree continuing training	8
7	Master degree continuing training	7
6	Bachelor degree Degree of 'professional bachelor in...' continuing training	6
5	Vocational qualification-level 4	5
4	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate Vocational qualification-level 3	4
3	Lower secondary school leaving certificate Vocational qualification-level 2	3
2	Basic education certificate (class five to eight) Vocational qualification-level 1	2
1	Primary education certificate	1
0	Pre-primary education	N/A

Source: Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013.

List of abbreviations

BQF	Bulgarian qualifications framework
EQF	European qualifications framework
NAVET	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework - European higher education area
SER	State educational requirements
VET	vocational education and training

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<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>

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European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory for validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Bulgaria*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

European Commission (2015). *Education and training monitor: country report: Bulgaria*.
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/tools/docs/2015/monitor2015-bulgaria_en.pdf