NQF state of play

Bulgaria 2018

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Introduction and context

Bulgaria is reforming all levels of education as a political priority. Although measures do not yet match the magnitude of challenges, there is an increased focus on reducing early school leaving, increasing teacher salaries, introducing dual learning, improving digital skills and strengthening inclusive education. The rate of early school leaving has fallen for the first time since 2011. The rate in 2017 was 12.7%, but remains above EU average of 10.6%. Early school leaving is particularly high in rural areas and among Roma. To tackle early school leaving Bulgaria has launched multidisciplinary teams of teachers, social workers, Roma mediators and other experts to identify out-of-school children and return them to education. Although not reflected automatically in the rate of early school leaving, data suggests that almost half of the children who dropped out of primary and lower secondary education in 2016/17 have emigrated, the figure being one quarter of dropouts in upper secondary. However, the data collection and monitoring system is insufficiently developed. The percentage of underachievers in science, maths and reading is around double the EU average, explained by a combination of education and equity factors. Low adult participation in lifelong learning (2.3% in 2017) coexists with skills mismatch and skills shortages. The skills of higher education graduates do not sufficiently match the needs of the jobs market. The employment rate of recent tertiary graduates increased by 8% to 86.5% and is now above the EU average (84.9%). However, skills shortages persist, particularly in the manufacturing, construction and digital sectors, as do skills mismatches. The employment rate of Bulgarian VET graduates is low; 59.1% of recent graduates were in employment in 2017, well below the EU average of 76.6% (European Commission, 2018).

The Bulgarian national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (BQF) was adopted in 2012, to raise trust in the Bulgarian education system and to support mobility and recognition of qualifications. The framework was also seen as an enabler of national reform, with implications for setting up a system for validating non-formal learning, improving education and training quality, modernising curricula and strengthening provider accountability.

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: pre-primary ([1]), primary

and secondary general education, VET, and higher education, described in terms of learning outcomes. At this stage, the framework is restricted to qualifications from the formal education and training system.

The BQF is now firmly embedded in the national legislation; implementation, though, is in its early stages. The referencing report was adopted by the Minister for Education and Science in March 2014 and amendments to national legislation will support implementation. A new pre-school and school education bill was adopted in late 2015 ([2]) and is expected to lead to amendment of the BQF at secondary education levels. Two bills amending and supplementing the Law on vocational training ([3]) support the BQF, with legal arrangements for validation of non-formal and 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 and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in May 2013. The referencing report has not yet been published on the official EQF website.

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 include (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013):

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.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

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. Competence descriptors distinguish between personal and professional competences. Personal competences 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 (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013). This is especially the case in developing 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 ([4]) does not stop at providing a 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, *резултати от учене*) are defined as 'acquired knowledge and skills as a result of formal, non-formal and independent (informal) learning' ([5]). In January 2014, the Council of Ministers adopted the new national strategy for lifelong learning (for 2014-20) ([6]) which addresses the challenges in all forms of education, training and learning – formal, non-formal, independent (informal) – which an individual could undertake throughout his/her 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*) ([7]); this is understood as 'a component of qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competences, which could be

assessed and validated through a certain number of credit points, linked to them'. 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 education standards ([8]). 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 education standards adopted after the new law on pre-school and school education entered into force. It is also in the new State education requirements on acquisition of higher education in regulated professions, adopted after the BQF entered into force.

Two bills amending the law on VET introduce the term and a legal definition of it. State education standards and examination requirements, especially those for acquiring vocational qualifications, 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; 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 ([9]). The Burgas Free University also uses learning outcomes in some of its master programme courses ([10]). However, there is no systematic approach for implementing a learning outcome approach in higher education. According to a Cedefop study (Cedefop, 2016), the law on higher education in Bulgaria ([11]) which governs accreditation of universities, does not stress the importance of learning outcomes for the accreditation process.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

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. Following the adoption of amendments to the EQF recommendation (May 2017), a working group has been mandated to update the BQF. The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) has been involved in developing and updating the list of qualifications for VET, which is integrated in the BQF. Sustained efforts are required for the BQF to achieve its aims (Cedefop, forthcoming).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[12]

Validation arrangements currently exist in general, vocational and adult education, but not in higher education. The Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) was amended in 2014 to include a procedure for validation, to establish equivalence between vocational knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal or informal learning and VET standards related to a specific professional qualification (Art. 40, State Gazette No.61/2014). In relation to this, Ordinance No. 2 on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences was approved and has been in force since 2015 (State Gazette 96/2014). It defines validation stages, requirements for assessors, procedural requirements and types of validation certificate to be issued. It also sets in place an institutional framework with clear allocation of responsibilities and coordination between public institutions and social partners, which is one of the strengths of the current system. Recent amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act (in force since 2016), brought it in line with VETA and introduced opportunities to acquire a vocational qualification in the new secondary education structure (Cedefop, 2018). Validation provides access to general education, VET and/or facilitates access to the labour market.

In VET, validation includes two main stages. The first, 'identification of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by a candidate' is further subdivided into sub-stages: determination of the professional field and profession; preliminary comparison of the declared professional knowledge, skills and competences with the learning outcomes included in the VET standard; guidance on additional training where necessary and verification of acquired professional knowledge, skills and competences; and assessment by examination in the theory and practice of the profession. The second stage refers to the recognition of the professional qualification or partial professional qualification (Article 6 of *State gazette* No 96/2014). The standards used for validation are the same as the VET standards used in formal education and training. Where VET standards for a particular vocational qualification do not exist, the approved curriculum for the respective profession is applied.

While there are no explicit quality assurance indicators for validation,

current legislation stipulates that institutions have to put in place internal quality assurance systems. The project *System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences: new opportunity for my future (2013-15),* 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, contributed to developing internal quality assurance mechanisms related to assessing evidence of previous learning. Training was provided to validation practitioners in VET and a *Manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning* was developed, providing methodological guidelines and instruments (such as comparative tables) for assessing equivalence between competences declared by a candidate and those defined for a specific vocational qualification in the corresponding VET standard.

The BQF has among its aims to facilitate validation and recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning and work-based training, by virtue of presenting detailed descriptions of learning outcomes in line with State education standards. Each unit of learning outcomes can be independently assessed and validated. However, at this stage the framework is restricted to qualifications from the formal education and training system. Certificates acquired through validation differ from issued VET certificates, as in title and description: the former describe validated competences ([13]) and the latter subjects of education.

Bulgaria has used the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in higher education from 2004 and is implementing the European Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) as a part of the National lifelong learning strategy. Credit transfer and accumulation has been introduced in the VET system with amendments to the VET Act in July 2014.

The project *New chance for success* (2014-20), implemented under the Science and education for smart growth operational programme (2014-20), enables validation arrangements for disadvantaged groups, including unemployed individuals and those at risk of unemployment. It provides literacy and basic education courses and awards certificates that allow access to general secondary education or to training for the acquisition of a VET qualification at BQF/EQF level 2.

NQF implementation and impact

The qualifications framework is firmly based on national legislation, adopted by the Council of Ministers ([14]) and further legislatively embedded in the Pre-school and School Education Act 2015, in force since August 2016. 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 is embedded in wider educational reforms; legislative changes have been introduced to strengthen BQF implementation and curricula and provision will be modernised. In accordance with Article 141 of the law for preschool and school education ([15]), all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents will be referenced to the relevant BQF level, linked to the corresponding EQF level.

Currently, the BQF comprises all education stages and levels (from pre-school to doctoral level); it can be regarded as a comprehensive framework. 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. However, it is restricted to qualifications from formal education and training; levels 6 to 8 are limited to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions.

Referencing to the EQF

Bulgaria delivered a joint referencing report in May 2013, referencing the BQF to the EQF and the QF-EHEA. The referencing report has not yet been published the on official EQF website.

Important lessons and future plans

The BQF 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 education levels and State education standards, 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. This is work in progress.

The framework can play an important role, if it is part of a wider strategic policy resulting in necessary reform and institutional regulations. 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 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. Among employers there is insufficient understanding of the differences between bachelor and master degrees.

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

Main sources of information

- The International and European Cooperation Directorate in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science is designated as the EQF national coordination point: https://www.mon.bg/en/303
- *Bulgarian referencing report to the European qualifications QF and to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area* (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (2013)) [unpublished].

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
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 – national VET level 2** **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**	No EQF level

Acronyms

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 education requirements
VET	vocational education and training
VETA	vocational education and training act

References

[URLs accessed 7.3.2019]

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].

Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074

Cedefop (forthcoming). *Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-18, country chapter Bulgaria*. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies.

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: country report Bulgaria*.

European Commission (2018). *Education and training monitor 2018: Bulgaria*. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-bulgaria_en.pdf

Notes

[1] Two years of pre-school education before first grade are mandatory.

[2] Pre-school and School Education Act. State gazette, No 79, 13.10.2015. In force since 1.8.2016.

[3] (a) Bill No 354-01-76 amending and supplementing the law on vocational education and training. Available in Bulgarian at the National Assembly website: http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-76.pdf [accessed 11.2.2019]. (b) Bill No 354-01-88 amending and supplementing the law on vocational education and training. Available in Bulgarian at the National Assembly website: http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-88.pdf [accessed 11.2.2019].

[4] National strategy for lifelong learning for 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. Available in Bulgarian at http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=690 [accessed 11.2.2019].

[5] National strategy for lifelong learning for 2008-13, p. 34. https://www.mon.bg/upload/6561/strategy_LLL_2014_2020.pdf

[6] 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; available in Bulgarian at: http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=4297 [accessed 11.2.2019].

[7] 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 учене', whereas in the latter it is 'единици учебни резултати'.

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

[9] New Bulgarian University, e-catalogue: http://ecatalog.nbu.bg/Default.asp?V_Year=2013 [accessed 11.2.2019].

[10] Burgas Free University, Master programmes: http://www.bfu.bg/index.php?q=node/1793 [accessed 11.2.2019].

[11] Law on higher education (in Bulgarian: Закон за висето образование). State gazette, No 112,

27.12.1995. Last amendment: State gazette, No 101, 22.11.2013. Available in Bulgarian at http://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2133647361 [accessed 11.2.2019].

[12] This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

[13] A demo version of a certificate for validation is available in Bulgarian at: http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/Svidetelstvo_validirane.pdf

[14] Decision of the Council of Ministers No 96 of 2 February 2012 on the adoption of the national qualifications framework of the Republic of Bulgaria.

[15] Law on pre-school and school education, State gazette, No 79/2015. http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=8245 [accessed 23.2.2017].

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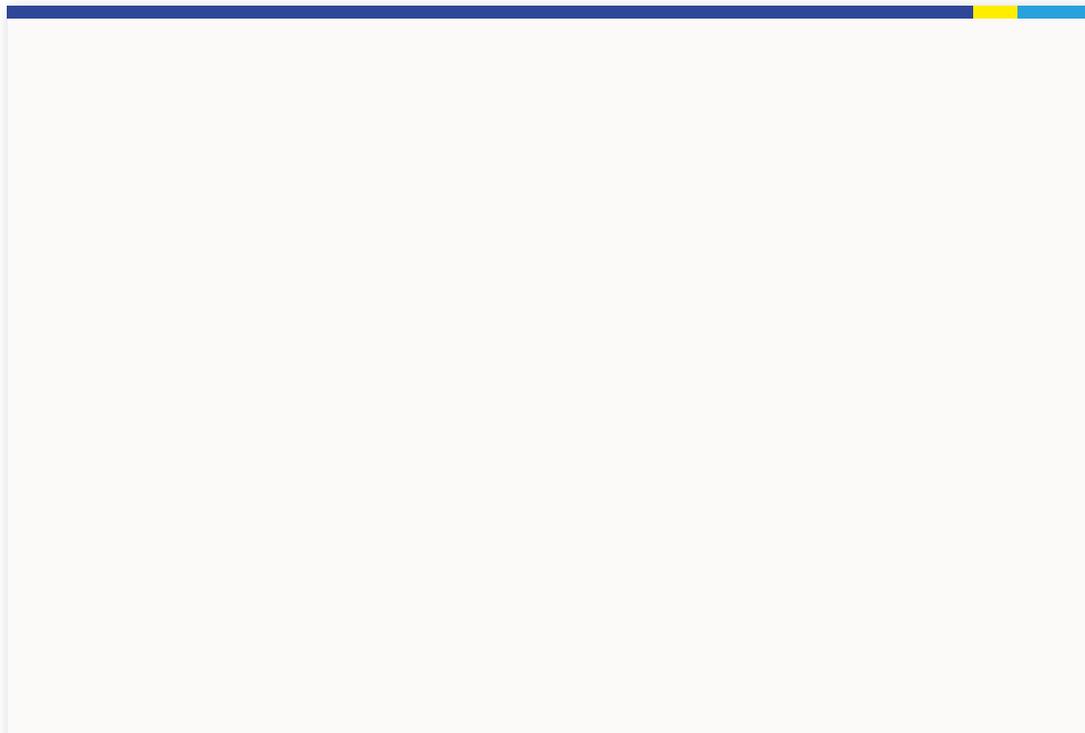
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