

NQF state of play



Germany 2018

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Introduction and context

Germany has one of the highest employment rates for recent graduates in the EU. Employment of recent VET graduates reached 91.3 % in 2017 and 93.0% for highly qualified individuals (ISCED levels 5-8) in 2017). Participation in early childhood education and care, tertiary education attainment and participation of adults in lifelong learning have increased in recent years, but the last two indicators remain below EU average levels. Despite this high employability rate and a long tradition, participation in vocational education and training (VET) slightly decreased to 46% in 2016, now below the EU average of 49%. The proportion of 15 year olds underachieving in reading and science has increased (fallen in maths) in 2017 compared to 2014, though still below the EU average. Early leaving from school (10.1% in 2017) is close to the EU target and slightly below the EU average. Socioeconomic background has a strong impact on educational outcomes; integration of high numbers of recently arrived refugees – many being young and poorly qualified – has been a major challenge. The Integration Act of 2016 aims to aid refugee access to work, vocational training and university education (European Commission, 2018).

Germany has an eight-level national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning based on learning outcomes (German qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen für lebenslanges Lernen* (DQR)). The framework is fully operational. It was given official status in May 2013 by the joint resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the conference of Ministers for Economics of the Länder and the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy ([1]). This resolution was the basis for administrative regulations such as indicating NQF/EQF levels on certificates and diplomas. The DQR manual was drafted in 2013 to support inclusion of qualifications ([2]). Initially, the DQR included most VET and higher education qualifications, but inclusion of qualifications from general education was postponed for a later stage. Following subsequent discussions, general education qualifications and most of those from regulated further training have been assigned to DQR levels and included in the DQR database ([3]). The upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (*Allgemeine Hochschulreife*) was allocated to DQR/EQF level 4. Qualifications from the non-formal sector have not yet been allocated to the framework, but the possibility of

developing suitable procedures for the non-formal sector is currently being discussed.

The DQR is the result of lengthy development work which started in 2006, when the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF)) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (Kultursministerkonferenz (KMK)) agreed to work together on it in response to the emerging European qualifications framework. Following extensive preparatory work, a proposal for a German NQF was published in February 2009. The development and implementation of the DQR has been a widely supported initiative in which social partners and business organisations have played a fundamental role through the German qualifications framework working group (*Arbeitskreis DQR*).

The DQR was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in 2012.

Policy objectives

Germany has actively supported the EQF initiative from the start and the extensive effort put into developing the DQR reflects this. The DQR focus on learning outcomes is seen as a catalyst for strengthening the coherence and overall permeability (*Durchlässigkeit*) of German education and training (Büchter et al., 2012), linking and integrating various subsystems and improving progression possibilities. Learners should be allowed to move between levels and institutions according to their knowledge, skills and competences, and be less restrained by formal, institutional barriers.

The objectives of the DQR are the following ([4]):

- a. increase transparency in German qualifications and aid their recognition elsewhere in Europe;
- b. support learner and employee mobility between Germany and other European countries and within Germany;
- c. improve visibility of equivalence and differences between qualifications and promote permeability;
- d. promote reliability, transfer opportunities and quality assurance;
- e. increase skills orientation of qualifications;
- f. reinforce learning outcomes orientation of qualification processes;
- g. improve opportunities for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- h. encourage and improve access to, and participation in, lifelong learning.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

An eight-level structure has been adopted to cover all main types of German qualifications.

Level descriptors describe the competences required to obtain a qualification. The overall structure is guided by the established German terminological and conceptual approach, referring to the ability to act (*Handlungskompetenz*) (BMBF and KMK, 2013; Gehmlich, 2009). The DQR differentiates between two categories of competence: professional and personal. The term competence lies at the heart of the DQR and signals readiness to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological competences in work or study situations and for occupational and personal development. Competence is understood in this sense as comprehensive action competence (Table 1). Methodological competence is understood as a transversal competence and is not separately stated in the DQR matrix. The DQR expresses only selected characteristics; the comprehensive and integrated notion of competence, underlying the DQR, has a strong humanistic and educational dimension ([5]).

Descriptors are partly expressed as alternatives, such as 'field of study or work' and 'specialised field of study or field of occupational activity'. The broad and inclusive nature of level descriptors, using parallel formulations if necessary, makes it possible to open up all levels to different kinds of qualification; higher levels are not restricted to qualifications awarded within the Bologna process. The table of level descriptors (DQR matrix) and a glossary are included in the DQR outline.

Table 1. **Level descriptors in the German qualifications framework for lifelong learning**

Level indicators (*)			
Structure of requirements			
Professional competence		Personal competence	
Knowledge	Skills	Social competence	Autonomy

Depth and breadth	Instrumental and systemic skills, judgment	Team/leadership skills, involvement and communication	Autonomous responsibility/ responsibility, reflectiveness and learning competence
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(*) This is just an analytical differentiation; the interdependence between different aspects of competence is emphasised (DQR, 2011, p. 5).

Source: The German qualifications framework for lifelong learning (DQR, 2011).

Each reference level maps comparable/equivalent rather than homogeneous, qualifications. One key principle of DQR is that 'alignment takes place in accordance with the principle that each qualification level should always be accessible via various educational pathways' (DQR, 2011, p. 6).

Orientation to learning outcomes is increasingly becoming standard in education, vocational training and higher education (BMBF and KMK, 2013, p. 96). All subsystems of education and training have taken important steps since 2009, though to varying degrees (Cedefop, 2016).

In VET, continuous development of the 'ability to act' concept (*Handlungskompetenz*), introduced in the 1990s, has gradually assumed a key role in qualifications definition, with clear input requirements about place, duration and content of learning in formalised learning programmes. The input-based governance approach in VET remains (Gössling, 2016). Competence-based training regulations and framework curricula structured in 'learning fields' have been developed. In recent years, digital skills have been strengthened in VET in cooperation with companies, chambers and universities (BMBF, 2018).

Competence orientation is also characteristic of reform in general education and development of national educational standards (*Bildungsstandards*). These currently exist for German and mathematics in primary education; for German, mathematics and first foreign language (English/French) for the secondary general school certificate (*Hauptschule*); for German, mathematics, foreign language (English/French), biology, chemistry and physics for the intermediate leaving certificate (*Realschule*); and for German, mathematics and first

foreign language (English/French) for the general higher education entrance qualification at the end of grade 12/13 (*Allgemeine Hochschulreife, Abitur*) (BMBF and KMK, 2013, p. 99). Using the educational standards, a pool of *Abitur* examination tasks in the subjects of German, mathematics and advanced foreign languages - common for all *Länder* - has been established to guarantee the comparability and high quality of *Abitur* examinations. Curricula have been reformed to reflect educational standards and subject-specific requirements for the *Allgemeine Hochschulreife* since the beginning of 2014/15 and apply for the *Abitur* examinations as of the 2016/17 school year (KMK, 2017).

In higher education, the implementation of a learning outcomes orientation was strengthened through the Bologna process, in general, and through the NEXUS project and the Quality Pact for teaching, among others.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

Development and implementation of the DQR is characterised by a bottom-up and consensus-seeking approach (Klenk, 2013). A national steering group (*Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsgruppe*) was jointly established by the BMBF and the KMK at the beginning of 2007. This coordination group appointed a working group (*Arbeitskreis DQR*) which comprises stakeholders from higher education, school education, VET, social partners, public institutions from education and the labour market, as well as researchers and practitioners. Decisions are based on consensus and each of the members works closely with their respective constituent institutions and organisations.

The body in charge of implementation is the coordination point for the German qualifications framework (*Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle* (B-L-KS)), set up by a joint initiative of the federal government and the *Länder*. The B-L-KS, which emerged from the former *Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsgruppe*, also assumes the function of the national coordination point (NCP) for the EQF. It has six members, including representatives from BMBF, the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy, the KMK and the Conference of Ministers for Economics of the *Länder*. Its main role is to monitor allocation of qualifications to ensure consistency in the overall DQR structure.

The work of the B-L-KS (NCP) is supported by the appropriate units of the BMBF and the Secretariat of the KMK. The units collaborate in performing their tasks.

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

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Implementation of DQR, with its focus on learning outcomes, has also strengthened work on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Various arrangements permit full or partial recognition of informally or non-formally acquired competences. Validation of non-formal and informal learning occurs in all education sectors but with different, tailor-made approaches using various instruments. Such validation also supports the transition from one education sector to another.

Legislation for validation of non-formal and informal learning is in place in VET. This includes the external students' examination (*Externenprüfung*) under Paragraph 45 (2) of the Vocational training Act ([7]) and Paragraph 37 (2) of the Crafts code. These arrangements lead to award of a full qualification (equal to those formally acquired) in a recognised apprenticeship. Admission to the external students' examination is subject to specific employment requirements: this is usually 1.5 times the length of the formal programme or equally long periods of initial training in another training occupation; applicants may also convincingly demonstrate that they have acquired vocational competence.

Similar to the external students' examination within IVET, admission to further training examinations in the context of qualifications such as *Industriemeister* (industrial master) and *Handwerksmeister* (master craftsman) is also possible via validation. This means that access to the examination is granted by work experience only. Preparatory training for this examination is not compulsory. General education school leaving certificates can be also acquired through an external examination (*Schulfremdenprüfung, Externenprüfung*) in all Länder, fulfilling the residence and minimum age requirements as well as evidence of appropriate examination preparation.

The Vocational Qualifications Recognition Act (BQFG), introduced in April 2012, provides individuals with the right to have their foreign-acquired qualifications matched to a German qualification by an appropriate authority. This act also includes, in Paragraph 14, other procedures for determining equivalence when no proof of prior learning can be provided; this opens opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal

learning. The act applies to initial vocational education and training (IVET) as well as further vocational education and training (CVET). The implementation and impact of the BQFG are evaluated regularly ([8]). The *Qualifikationsanalyse* (qualification analysis) instrument was developed to support practical implementation. This has developed methodological standards and tools for validating professional knowledge, skills and competences.

The instrument has been further developed in the *ValiKom* project ([9]) from 2015 and implemented for different target groups. *ValiKom* is a reference project to set up a validation system in Germany, addressing adults who acquired skills and competences through work but lack a formal qualification and a certificate. The development of procedure is based on standards for assessing the equivalence of non-formally/informally acquired skills with reference to formal qualifications and 'reference occupation' (recognised training or further training qualifications). It addresses not only low-skilled adults working in Germany but also employees from a variety of backgrounds who wish to access further training. At the end of 2018, BMBF started *ValiKom-Transfer* involving up to 30 chambers and opening the validation process to more occupations. Using the results of this new initiative, possibilities of embedding the validating procedure in a law will be examined.

Two KMK decisions provide the basis for validation in higher education. The first refers to access to higher education for qualified workers and has been in place since March 2009: those holding certain vocational qualifications, without a proper upper secondary qualification, can be admitted to higher education. The second refers to granting credits for competence acquired at work. According to these decisions, knowledge and skills acquired outside higher education can be recognised up to a maximum of 50% if content and level are equal to the equivalent in formal qualifications. Procedures to credit non-formal and informal learning were developed and tested in the *Transitions from VET to higher education* initiative (*Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung* (ANKOM)) ([10]).

There are also several other initiatives and research projects on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB)) has concluded the project Implementation of methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning – requirements and possible courses of action ([11]).

The German public employment service, in cooperation with Bertelsmann

Stiftung, started a large-scale ICT-based assessment project to develop and implement digital tests for the assessment of competences gained at work in the MySKILLS project ([12]) So far tests for eight professions have been completed and are available for use within placement processes.

NQF implementation and impact

The DQR has reached its fully operational status. Key documents and responsibilities for its implementation have been agreed by main stakeholders and published:

- a. the joint resolution of 1 May 2013 paved the way to full operation of the DQR ([13]);
- b. a DQR website ([14]) and a comprehensive database, including all allocated qualifications, are operational ([15]);
- c. the DQR manual ([16]) describing responsibilities, procedures ([17]), standards and methods of qualification allocation. A description of the procedure for allocating qualifications from non-formal learning contexts will be added when agreed.

Most qualifications from VET, higher education, general education and from regulated further training have been assigned to DQR levels and included in the DQR database. An important characteristic of DQR is that each qualification level should always be accessible via various education pathways. VET qualifications were allocated from levels 1 to 7. One example is allocation of the bachelor and master craftsman qualification to level 6, which shows that higher DQR levels are open to qualifications from different education sectors and regarded as comparable ([18]).

Developing and implementing criteria and procedures to include qualifications from outside formal education and training is an important goal but also challenging, as criteria and procedures need to be agreed by all stakeholders ([19]).

The DQR is a non-regulatory framework and its integration into policies of different education sectors is an evolutionary process. First references to the DQR and its categories have already been made in regulatory instruments of the formal sector, as in the new framework curricula for part-time vocational schools (*Berufsschule*) of the *Länder*, VET training regulations have been designed as more competence-oriented since 2015. The DQR has also been a driving force to strengthen further/higher VET and improve its quality ([20]). Increasing interest is observed from providers of non-formal qualifications to use the DQR level descriptors when designing qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). The DQR is also used in the academic sector within procedures to credit competences acquired in other education sectors.

BMBF, with the Federal Institute for VET (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB)), social partners and universities, carried out a project exploring the possibilities of joint descriptions of learning outcomes and development of joint curricula based on DQR level 5. Two subprojects analysed the level 5 qualifications 'IT specialist' and 'motor vehicle service technician' in comparison with higher education study programmes. The aim was to aid permeability between VET and higher education in both directions ([21]). One of the findings was that the DQR, with its learning outcomes approach, is a helpful basis for joint development of curricula across education sectors. The project showed that, while level DQR 5 can be an important bridge from VET into higher education, more challenges remain in bridging the pathway from higher education into VET.

Implementation of the DQR is a joint process involving a whole range of stakeholders in different parts of education and training and on the labour market; all stakeholders use their channels to communicate the DQR to their target groups. Evidence on the awareness and use of the DQR is growing. An online survey of the Association of German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2016 ([22]) revealed that 20% of company representatives had heard about the DQR, 6% more than in 2014. The relevance of the DQR for comparability of qualifications was seen as particularly positive by 51%. Companies use the DQR for various purposes, such as recruiting staff, though less for individual career and personnel development. However, there is a need to inform employers more about the benefits of the DQR. A recent study carried out in Germany on the potential use of the German qualifications framework (Hochschule für angewandtes Management et al., 2016) identifies several areas where the DQR can add value. It can be used to support human resource development (recruitment and development of employees); this applies especially to small and medium-sized enterprises with limited human resource capacity, but will require capacity building and awareness raising.

Referencing to the EQF

The joint steering committee set up by the federal government and the *Länder* in 2007 is in charge of referencing. The referencing report was presented in December 2012 (BMBF and KMK, 2013).

Gradually, from January 2014, EQF and DQR levels are featuring on VET certificates, certificate supplements and higher education diploma supplements. Since 2018 there has been work on indicating DQR and EQF levels on general education diplomas (in line with the practice of 16 *Länder*). DQR/EQF levels are also indicated in the qualification database ([23]). For example, German master craftsman certificates have indicated the NQF/EQF level since 2014; like the bachelor degree, they are related to level 6. From an education and training policy perspective, this is considered a milestone ([24]). Allocation to level and reference on certificates signal the high value and quality of this qualification. German VET qualifications are placed on nearly all NQF/EQF levels except level 8, with three-year apprenticeships leading to level 4.

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the DQR is embedded in a broader context of reforms to strengthen the outcome orientation of German education and training. It is also linked to initiatives to support permeability within VET and between VET and higher education, such as the ANKOM initiative, that involves stakeholders from VET and higher education supporting recognition of learning outcomes.

DQR development is also characterised by a comprehensive vision and coherent set of level descriptors, spanning all levels of education and training. The comprehensive nature of the framework has been strengthened with the inclusion of general education qualifications in 2017, now encompassing all sectors of formal education and training (VET, higher education, general education). Discussions on criteria and procedures to include qualifications awarded outside regulated education and training system are continuing. The comprehensive nature of level descriptors and scope of the framework makes it possible to identify and understand better the similarities and differences between qualifications in different areas of education and training. A permeable system, with better horizontal and vertical progression possibilities, is at the heart of DQR developments, as is parity of esteem between VET and general education and efforts to include non-formal and informal learning.

NQF development and implementation is also characterised by strong and broad involvement of stakeholders from all subsystems of education and training (general education, school and work-based VET, higher education), and from the labour market, ministries and *Länder*. Creating and sustaining mutual understanding and trust between stakeholders from different education sectors is seen as a key condition and a challenge for further implementation of the DQR (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Stakeholders also agree that alignment of qualifications within German education to reference levels of the DQR should not replace the existing system of access. Achieving a DQR reference level does not provide automatic entitlement to access the next level. Achievement of a reference level has also not been considered alongside implications for collective wage bargaining and the Law on Remuneration (DQR, 2011, pp. 5-6).

Main sources of information

The federal government/*Länder* coordination point assumes the function of EQF NCP.

- DQR website: <http://www.dqr.de>
- DQR qualifications database: <https://www.dqr.de/>
- BMBF and KMK (2013). German EQF referencing report.
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/German_EQF_Referencing_Report.pdf

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctorate (Doktor)	8
7	Master degree (Master) Strategic IT professional (certified) (Strategischer IT Professional (Geprüfter)) Other further vocational training qualifications according to Vocational Training Act and Handicraft Code (level 7)	7
6	Bachelor degree (Bachelor) Commercial specialist (certified) (Fachkaufmann (Geprüfter)) Business management specialist (certified) (Fachwirt (Geprüfter)) Master craftsman (certified) (Meister (Geprüfter)) Operative IT professional (certified) (Operativer IT Professional (Geprüfter)) Trade and technical school (State-certified) (Fachschule (Staatlich Geprüfter)) Other further vocational training qualifications according to Vocational Training Act and Handicraft Code (level 6)	6
5	IT specialist (certified) (IT-Spezialist (Zertifizierter)) Service technician (certified) (Service-techniker (Geprüfter)) Other further vocational training qualifications according to Vocational Training Act and Handicraft Code (level 5)	5

4	<p>Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (Allgemeine Hochschulreife (AHR))</p> <p>Qualification entitling holder to study particular subjects at a higher education institution (Fachgebundene Hochschulreife (FgbHR))</p> <p>Qualification entitling holder to study at a university of applied sciences (Fachhochschulreife (FHR))</p> <p>Dual VET (three-year and three-and-a-half-year training courses)</p> <p>Full-time vocational school (regulated under Länder law) (Berufsfachschule)</p> <p>Full vocational qualification (full-time vocational school) (Berufsfachschule)</p>	4
3	<p>General education school leaving certificate after 10 years at Realschule (Mittlerer Schulabschluss)</p> <p>Dual VET (two-year training courses)</p> <p>Full-time vocational school (general education school leaving certificate obtained on completion of grade 10 at Realschule or, under certain circumstances, at other lower secondary school types) (Mittlerer Schulabschluss (Berufsfachschule))</p>	3
2	<p>Lower secondary school leaving certificate after 9 years (Hauptschulabschluss)</p> <p>Vocational training preparation (Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung)</p> <p>Employment agency measures (Maßnahmen der Arbeitsagentur)</p> <p>Year of pre-vocational training (Berufsvorbereitungsjahr)</p> <p>Introductory training for young people (Einstiegsqualifizierung)</p> <p>Basic vocational training (Berufliche Grundbildung)</p>	2

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**Vocational training preparation
(Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung)**

**Employment agency measures (vocational
preparation schemes) (Maßnahmen der
Arbeitsagentur (Berufsvorbereitende
Bildungsmaßnahmen))**

**Year of pre-vocational training
(Berufsvorbereitungsjahr)**

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Acronyms

ANKOM	<i>Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung</i> [transitions from vocational high school education]
BIBB	Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung [Federal Institute for VET]
B-L-KS	<i>Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle</i> [national coordination point]
BMBF	<i>Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung</i> [Federal Ministry of Education and Research]
BQFG	Vocational Qualifications Assessment Law
DQR	<i>Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen für lebenslanges Lernen</i> [German qualifications framework for lifelong learning]
EQF	European qualifications framework
IT	information technology
KMK	<i>Kultusministerk Konferenz</i> [Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder]
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

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- [4] German EQF referencing report (BMBF and KMK, 2013).
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eaceqf/files/German_EQF_Referencing_Report.pdf
- [5] The ability to act (Handlungskompetenz) in vocational school curricula is not restricted to the world of work, but implies individual ability and readiness to act adequately socially and be individually responsible.
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https://www.bmbf.de/files/Gemeinsamer_Beschluss_final_ohne_Unterschriften.pdf
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