

NQF state of play

 **France 2020**

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Overview

Stage of development: Operational stage

NQF linked to EQF: 

Scope of the framework:

NQF covers all levels and types of vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications and the national baccalaureate (general, technological and vocational). Open to qualifications awarded outside the formal education system.

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Law No 2002-73 on social modernisation (2002) (in French) Law No 2018-771 for the freedom to choose one's professional future (2018) (in French) Decree No 2019-14 on the NQF of vocational and professional qualifications (2019) (in French)

NQF/EQF website:

 [Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

 [National register of vocational and professional qualifications \(RNCP\)](#)

Introduction and context

Participation in education and training increased in France over the last 10 years and is above the EU average. The share of early leavers has dropped by 4.2% since 2009 to 8.2%, compared to the EU-27 average of 10.2% in 2019; it is below the EU and national targets (EU less than 10%; France less than 9.5%), but shares are higher for men and foreign-born population. The 2018 PISA results show that France has relatively good educational outcomes. Underachievement in basic skills (reading, maths and science) among 15-year-olds is (at 20.9%, 21.3% and 20.5% respectively) slightly below the EU-27 average (at 22.5%, 22.9% and 22.3% respectively) and is higher in VET. Performance gaps in educational outcomes exist and correlate with disadvantaged socioeconomic background and territories disparities. National strategies in place to reduce inequalities in schools include the lowering (2019) of the compulsory age of pre-school education from six to three years and extending compulsory education from age 16 to 18 (as of 2020/21), reducing class sizes in primary education in disadvantaged schools and supporting teacher capacity to deliver differentiated teaching, as well as digital education initiatives in public schools for both pupils and teachers, and an increased budget and targeted support for distance learning during the health crisis (European Commission, 2020a and 2020b).

Participation in adult learning increased by 0.9% between 2018 and 2019 and is well above the EU average (19.5% and 10.8% respectively). The digitalisation of the personal training account (CPF), now accessible online by both individuals and companies, created more training opportunities for upskilling (distance learning, apprenticeships); focus has been given to upskilling the least qualified, distance learning programmes and regional guidance (European Commission, 2020a and 2020b).

Upper secondary and tertiary education reforms are subject to wide consultation and approached in a coordinated manner. The general and technological *baccalauréat* (upper secondary school-leaving examination) ([1]) is being revised (to be in place by 2021), including a more flexible curriculum, and increased guidance to prepare students better for higher education or the labour market. During the health pandemic the *baccalauréat* examination for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 has been replaced by continuous assessment. A new higher education law ([2]) was adopted in 2018, aiming to increase the completion rate at bachelor level (*/licence*) through educational support, more flexible

programmes and new teaching methods.

The share of VET learners in 2019 was 39.3% against the EU-27 average of 48.4%. Employment rates of vocational education and training (VET) graduates dropped by 3.4 points to 68.8% in 2019 (against 79.1% in the EU-27). A major reform of the vocational upper secondary path, gradually implemented as of 2019, has introduced more guidance in lower secondary education towards VET. The 2018 CVET and apprenticeship reform established a new funding model for apprenticeship training centres, now also open to private providers, and additional funds for innovation through the Trades and qualifications campuses ([3]) (European Commission, 2020 and Cedefop ReferNet 2020).

The French national qualifications framework (NQF) can be seen as belonging to the first generation of European qualifications frameworks. Its establishment was signalled by the setting up, in 2002, of the National register of vocational and professional qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (RNCP)) and the National commission for vocational and professional qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* (CNCP)), the body responsible for managing and updating the RNCP until 2018 ([4]). It covered vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications, including those from higher education referenced to the EQF levels 3-8, while excluding secondary general education qualifications.

As the French qualification system has developed considerably ([5]) over recent decades, and more closely aligned to the European qualifications framework (EQF), the French NQF has been revised. The 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ([6]) and subsequent legislation ([7]) strengthened the legal basis of the NQF and defined a new eight-level structure and level descriptors in three categories, similar to those of the EQF: complexity of knowledge, level of expertise and degree of responsibility and autonomy.

The CNCP functions were absorbed and replaced, in 2019, by a new commission (*Commission de la certification professionnelle*) established within France Compétences. France Compétences acts as the national coordination point for the EQF. It is the body responsible for quality assurance, funding and governance of continuing VET and apprenticeships.

The five-level structure in use until 2019 was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF in 2010). The new eight-level national qualifications framework in use as of 2019 was referenced to the

European qualifications framework (EQF) in 2021.

Policy objectives

The French qualifications framework has evolved through different stages, aiming to address new challenges and a wide range of policy objectives.

The initial aim of implementing a classification of vocational and professional qualifications ([8]) in France between 1972 and 2002 was to promote social justice, reaching parity of esteem of qualifications awarded as a result of adult training with educational qualifications through levelling. Policy objectives started to shift in the 1990s towards combatting unemployment. The goal of accreditation was no longer to recognise the duration of training programmes, but their learning outcomes, with a focus on assessment of competences (Paddeu et al., 2018).

Since its establishment in 2002, the national register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) ([9]) has been considered the NQF. The RNCP has been an important tool in quality assurance of qualifications and promotion of lifelong learning, and closely linked to the system for validating non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience, VAE*); all qualifications included in the RNCP can be acquired through validation (except regulated qualifications) and the relevant VAE procedure is specified for each of them. The RNCP aims to ensure quality and transparency of vocational and professional ([10]) qualifications through a publicly accessible register of qualifications formally recognised by the State and social partners. It is a single reference tool for all stakeholders concerned with occupations, qualifications and training within the country and internationally, enabling the identification of qualifications 'for vocational and professional purposes' and aiding understanding of the French qualifications landscape.

With the 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future, which created a new article in the Labour Code, the French NQF became formally embedded in legislation, as distinct from the RNCP. The French qualifications framework has been revised to reflect considerable changes in all parts of education and training and the qualifications system. The 2018 Law ([11]) transformed continuing VET and apprenticeship system governance and financing and established an eight-level structure. It reinforced the quality assurance function of the framework and the supporting registers ([12]) by clarifying the role and responsibilities of all certifying bodies of qualifications registered by law

and defined seven criteria and 32 indicators for registering of qualifications on demand (France Compétences, 2021, pp. 31, 42, 53 and 88) ([13]). One of the major objectives of the revised framework is to set up a system that is more easily understandable by users (France Compétences, 2021, p. 36). It made mandatory that all (RNCP) qualifications have to be structured into units/blocks of assessable competences, encouraging the acquisition of competences and qualifications throughout a person's working life, if necessary by alternating the acquisition of blocks of competences in education and training with periods in employment. Thus, the revised French framework aims to increase transparency and flexibility of qualifications and horizontal and vertical progression possibilities. In parallel, the 2018 reform of the upper secondary vocational pathway, with gradual implementation by 2021, aimed to improve links between apprenticeship-based and academic pathways, facilitating progressive learning and re-engagement in training to acquire or complement a qualification from a lifelong learning perspective (France Compétences, 2021).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The revised French national framework of vocational and professional qualifications ([14]) has eight levels. Levels are defined using learning outcomes in three categories: (a) complexity of knowledge associated with carrying out the corresponding professional activity ([15]); (b) level of expertise, assessed according to the complexity and technical nature of an activity in a work process ([16])

- in the complexity and technical nature of a task, or activity, in a process;
- in the level of mastery of the professional activity;
- in the mobilisation of a range of cognitive and practical skills;
- in expertise in the field of communication and interpersonal relations in the professional context;
- in the ability to communicate expertise (France Compétences, 2021, p. 8).
-); and (c) level of responsibility and autonomy in organising work ([17]).

The framework has strong labour market focus ([18]). Only qualifications and diplomas with professional integration objectives are included in the RNCP.

Level descriptors in the French national qualifications framework (*)

LEVELS LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

8	Level 8 certifies the ability to identify and solve complex and new problems involving numerous fields, by using the most advanced form of knowledge and expertise, to design and direct research and innovation projects and processes. The national diploma of Doctorate is classified at this level of the national framework.
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LEVELS LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

7	Level 7 certifies the ability to design and implement alternative strategies for developing professional activity in complex professional contexts, and to assess the risks and consequences of one's activity. Diplomas conferring Master degrees are classified at this level of the national framework.
6	Level 6 certifies the ability to analyse and solve complex unforeseen problems in a specific field, to formalise know-how and methods to exploit them. Bachelor degrees (<i>licence</i>) are classified at this level of the national framework.
5	Level 5 certifies the ability to master expertise in a field of activity, to develop solutions to new problems, to analyse and interpret information by applying concepts, to communicate know-how and methods.
4	Level 4 certifies the ability to perform activities requiring the mobilisation of a wide range of skills, to adapt existing solutions to solve specific problems, to organise one's work autonomously in contexts that are generally predictable but liable to change, as well as participating in assessing activities. The national <i>baccalauréat</i> diploma is classified at this level of the national framework.
3	Level 3 certifies the ability to perform activities and solve problems by selecting and applying methods, tools, materials and basic information, in a known context, and the ability to adapt the means of implementation and one's behaviour to the circumstances.
2	Level 2 certifies the ability to perform simple activities and solve routine problems using simple rules and tools and applying professional expertise in a structured context. The associated professional activity is carried out with a limited level of autonomy.

LEVELS LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

1	Level 1 of the national professional qualifications framework corresponds to the mastery of basic knowledge.
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(*) For more detailed level descriptors of levels 2 to 8 consult France Compétences, 2021, pp. 8-9 and the Labour Code.

Source: France Compétences, 2021, p. 35.

Level 1 has no descriptors as it covers mastery of basic knowledge, which is not sufficient to certify the ability to exercise a professional activity. This level is not linked to qualifications included in the RNCP. The newly introduced level 2 covers simple activities and limited autonomy. Levels 3 to 8 cover qualifications previously included at the five levels of the RNCP. The previous level 1 was dissociated into the two new levels 7 and 8, assigning master qualifications at level 7 and doctoral qualifications at level 8 ([19]) (France Compétences, 2021, p. 36).

While the EQF descriptors are taken into account, the French level descriptors mirror some national specificities: expertise is used instead of skills, emphasising 'the attachment to the notion of evaluation of competences and the desire to give an operational dimension to the qualifications classified in the framework.' Also, contextualisation of qualifications is a very important element, systematically emphasised in relation to knowledge and expertise dimension (France Compétences, 2021, p. 48).

The notion of competence ([20]) was introduced in French VET in the 1970s and in general education in the 1980s. It is now explicitly referred to in curriculum documents in all subsystems of education and training (Cedefop, 2016). The learning outcomes approach was strengthened by the 2002 Law on social modernisation and subsequent decrees that set up the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE), and its emphasis on validation and certification of competences, based on learning outcomes, for awarding any kind of qualification. The learning outcomes descriptions form the basis on which all qualifications are approved for registration into the RNCP.

Initial vocational qualifications are increasingly defined in line with

the NQF level descriptors (knowledge, expertise and responsibility and autonomy) and different forms of VET provision differ in how learning outcomes are assessed.

In higher education, a number of policy developments and changes were introduced over the last two decades, aligning the architecture of the higher education landscape to the EHEA. These included aligning academic higher education programmes into the three-level structure of studies ([21]) and ensuring progression in line with the competence-based approach based on learning outcomes and ECTS credits ([22]) also creating bridging solutions between bachelor decrees to prevent students from dropping out without a diploma. The establishment of the ECTS system and gradual adaptation to the Bologna process resulted in decompartmentalisation and reclassification of studies into specialisms corresponding to competences and learning outcomes defined per education level ([23]), increased focus on recognition of non-formal and informal learning and flexibility (individualisation) of training pathways (France Compétences, pp. 22, 59, 68-69). Further changes introduced in 2018 ([24]) clarified the learning outcomes certified at bachelor, master and doctorate national degree levels (the licence-master-doctorate model, LDM) and programme description based on ECTS credits, and increased the focus on career guidance ([25]). The master degree (dissociated from the old level I) established at EQF level 7 is a high-level qualification benchmark corresponding to a common core of knowledge, skills and competences that can be acquired through different pathways (France Compétences, pp. 66-67). The introduction of a new university level bachelor's in technology degree at level 6 ([26]) in 2019 and the harmonisation of bachelor programmes delivered by different types of higher education institutions in 2020 ([27]) are also direct results of the restructuring of the higher education sector in line with the QF-EHEA and EQF recommendation (France Compétences, 2021, p. 24).

The notion of 'units/blocks of competences' (*blocs de compétences*) was introduced in 2014 ([28]), as an organisation of competences in qualification standards following the logic of socially meaningful activities. A unit/block of competences is an 'identified part of a vocational qualification', defined as a 'homogeneous and coherent set of competences contributing to carrying out a professional activity autonomously, and which can

be assessed and validated' (Labour Code, Article L6113-1). The 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ([29]) promotes and facilitates lifelong learning within the demand-driven national qualifications system by making the use of units/blocks of competences compulsory for all RNCP qualifications. The 2018 Law also opened up the possibility for the transfer of non-levelled qualifications included in the specific register (SR) as recognised units of competences of qualifications already registered in the RNCP (by decision of the agreement of the owner of the qualification), and of establishing/sharing common blocks of competences between two or several RNCP qualifications, with the possibility that the *Commission de la certification professionnelle* would oblige owners of qualifications to share blocks of competences between two or more qualifications (France Compétences, 2021, pp. 34, 82, 84).

In the new national framework setting, a long-term objective is to define units/blocks of competences common to different qualifications to allow flexibility in career change in IVET and in less linear career paths in continuing training (France Compétences, 2021, p. 84). From 2019, qualification awarding bodies that want to register their qualifications in the RNCP have to provide a presentation of the units/blocks of competences corresponding to the different parts of qualifications. A 2020 decree defined the conditions for recognising successfully assessed units of competences in case the full IVET qualification was not achieved ([30]), thus easing re-engagement from a lifelong learning perceptive (adult/continuing training course or VAE) to achieve the full qualification (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2021).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The National commission for vocational and professional qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle*, CNCP) was introduced in 2002 through the Law on social modernisation ([31]), along with the National register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP). It was responsible for supervising the system of vocational and professional qualifications and for managing the register with the mission to:

- a. ensure the coherence of, and promote pathways between, qualifications;
- b. supervise the renewal of qualification documents and their adaptation to changes in qualifications and work organisation;
- c. update the RNCP;
- d. inform the public and companies about the qualifications listed in the RNCP and those recognised in the Member States of the European Union;
- e. issue recommendations for awarding bodies;
- f. draw up a new classification covering levels of certification in relation to jobs held.

The CNCP was a platform for cooperation between all ministries involved in the design and award of qualifications (education, higher education, labour, social affairs, agriculture, culture, youth and sports, defence, finance, health) and the social partners and other stakeholders (such as chambers and representatives of the regions) involved in the qualifications system. Given the increasing diversity of qualifications in France over recent decades, the broad composition of the CNCP ([32]) was necessary to ensure quality, credibility and ownership.

With the 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ([33]), which created a new article in the Labour Code ([34]), the French NQF became formally embedded in legislation, as distinct from the RNCP. Its levels and characteristics are defined by the 2019 Decree on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications ([35]).

The 2018 Law also created **France Compétences**, a new national public institution with a quadripartite structure representing the State, the regions and employer and employee organisations at national and

international level. It operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Professional Integration; its mission is to ensure implementation of national CVET policies, finance vocational training and apprenticeships, regulate the VET market in terms of skill needs and demand and support synergies between all VET stakeholders. In 2019, a new committee within France Compétences (*Commission de la certification professionnelle*) was established ([36]) to ensure the qualifications included in the register meet the needs of society and the economy and offer a flexible qualifications system responding rapidly to changes. Its mission, defined in the labour code, is to:

- a. issue notices of assent related to applications for registration in the national registers (RNCP and SR);
- b. draw up a list of professions considered to be 'emerging' or changing particularly rapidly;
- c. send requests to awarding bodies to establish equivalences between qualifications and/or units/blocks of competences within same level qualifications registered either by law (by ministries) or on demand (by other certifying bodies);
- d. issue methodological recommendations for awarding bodies;
- e. contribute to the harmonisation of the terminology used for the titles of vocational and professional qualifications;
- f. contribute to international work on the quality of qualifications (France Compétences, p. 4).

The committee continues to represent the platform for cooperation between ministries involved in the design and award of qualifications; it is composed of 18 members (French State, regions and social partners) ([37]).

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

[38]

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in France is strongly articulated to lifelong learning, training and employment policies. Its development builds on longstanding practices of identification and recognition of prior learning and professional experience. While different procedures and mechanisms for identification, documentation and assessment of non-formal and informal learning have been developed ([39]) this section is concerned with the system of validation of acquired experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE), whose goal is obtaining a qualification registered in the national register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP). VAE includes, by definition, the stages of identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The French VAE system is integrated in the labour and education code and procedures are defined by legislation ([40]), ensuring consistency across sectors. VAE allows 'the award of whole or parts of qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose (*finalité professionnelle*) at all levels' (Mathou, 2019, p. 2), without the need to go through formal training. Thus, both full and partial validation are possible, the latter resulting in a document taking stock of the units of competences validated. However, to apply for VAE it is required to have carried out at least one year of activity directly related to the activities outlined in the qualification standards and demonstrate required learning outcomes.

The focus on certification is considered a strength of the VAE system, whose development was simultaneous to the restructuring of the qualifications system in 2002. Qualifications obtained through VAE are the same as those awarded via initial or continuous formal education and training or apprenticeship and they must be registered in the RNCP. Qualification standards (*référentiels de certification*) in the RNCP describe knowledge, skills and know-how and their assessment in relation to occupation standards (*référentiels d'activités*). A VAE procedure must be in place for all qualifications registered in the RNCP (except for those linked to regulated professions). Thus, VAE is considered a fourth route to qualifications ([41]). In higher education, VAE is used in conjunction with the European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS).

Experiments to link workplace training schemes with VAE are also in place (France Compétences, 2021, p 23).

In comparison with systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning in other European countries, the French VAE system is very well developed. Legislative initiatives over the past five years resulted in substantial changes addressing some of the challenges that had been identified: the need to broaden access, diversify candidate profiles, shorten the length of the process, encourage its use across a wider range of qualifications, and improve stakeholder coordination. The system was considered demanding, especially for candidates with low skills and low levels of qualification. The 2014 Law on VET, employment and social democracy ([42]) broadened access to VAE for individuals without a qualification at EQF level 3, recognising as 'experience' training periods undertaken in a work context; it introduced the personal training account (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) for easier financing, improved support to candidates, clarifying the role of various stakeholders involved, and included provisions for statistical monitoring of VAE pathways. The 2016 Law on work, modernising social dialogue and securing career paths ([43]) reduced the minimum duration of required experience from three years to one, strengthened the support and guidance offered to candidates, simplified procedures, and removed the timeframe for the validity of parts of qualifications obtained through VAE. The latter aspect is linked to the use of units/blocks of competences (*blocs de compétences*), which remain valid without a time limit and which facilitate the articulation of VAE with training.

Since 2002, more than 330 000 full qualifications awarded by ministries have been obtained through VAE, mostly in the health and social sectors. Although VAE constitutes a third route to qualifications on equal footing with initial education and training and continuing training schemes, the number of applications has been gradually decreasing across all ministries. Within the State certifying bodies (ministries), the number of VAE applicants that acquired a qualification through VAE in 2019 was the lowest since 2004. There is no unique information system for monitoring VAE applications by State awarding bodies, data are yearly collected and aggregated by Dares ([44]). Data are not available for other types of awarding bodies.

The governance of the VAE system, considered one of its weak points, is being reorganised along with the governance of vocational training following the new 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ([45]). The new governing body, France Compétences, ensures

registration of qualifications in the RNCP is also available through VAE. Overall governance of the VAE system and statistical monitoring of the use of VAE remains under the responsibility of the State ([46]).

NQF implementation and impact

The revised French framework established in 2019 is a comprehensive one and demand-driven, open to all vocational and professional qualifications awarded in vocational education and training and higher education with clear professional scope. They are awarded by a range of institutions:

- a. diplomas and degrees ([47]) issued on behalf of the State, legislated by French ministries and created on recommendation and in cooperation with 11 tripartite inter-ministerial vocational advisory committees (*Commissions professionnelles consultatives*, CPCs ([48]));
- b. qualifications issued on behalf of the State but where no consultative committee is in place ([49]);
- c. qualifications awarded by public or private bodies in their own name, such as higher education institutions, chambers and private education providers;
- d. sector-specific or industry-level qualifications (*certificats de qualification professionnelle*, CQP).

State-issued qualifications are registered by law and other qualifications (on demand) are registered after assent of the committee of vocational and professional qualifications established within France Compétences. The French NQF is open to qualifications awarded outside the regulated national qualification system, including private sector and international qualifications, as long as they satisfy the respective quality criteria in place ([50]).

The upper secondary general and technological baccalaureates (*baccalauréat général and technologique*) are now included in the framework and assigned to level 4 as they 'constitute a social indicator of level for the labour market, even without a professional contextualisation'; they legitimate entry into higher education; they are not listed in the RNCP where only the vocational/professional baccalaureate is listed. There is a national consensus that learning acquired in initial education up to grade 9 (nursery school, primary school and first cycle/lower secondary level) has no professional dimension and remains outside the scope of the framework (France Compétences, 2021, p. 14).

There are two qualifications registers in place in France. The RNCP

continues to act as technical support to the NQF where all levelled qualifications are listed (registered by law or on demand). The second register (or inventory, *Inventaire*) originally set up by the RNCP in 2014 ([51]) to include awards that could not be levelled as they were not directly associated with an occupation recognised through an industry-level agreement ([52]) (Paddeu et al., 2018) has been kept and renamed the Specific register (SR). The awards in the SR are complementary to a qualification in the RNCP or attest transversal or basic skills. The two registers together give an overview of all diplomas and certificates relevant to the labour market, with or without a level, awarded within and outside the education system; the RNCP keeps the record of former qualifications which are not awarded any longer ([53]). The number of qualifications has decreased in recent years, especially in higher education, where the number of diplomas registered has been reduced by half (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). There is a fiche for types of diploma, with a list of higher education institutions which provide them ([54]). Providers of qualifications are strongly encouraged to create common qualifications and to operate within networks.

Requirements for inclusion of qualifications in the RNCP are specified in legislation ([55]), aiming for national coherence and the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. As of 2019, these requirements include:

- a. definition of qualifications using an occupational standard (*référentiel d'activités*); a competence standard (*référentiel de compétences*) specifying competences and knowledge, including transversal ones; and an assessment standard (*référentiel d'évaluation*) defining the criteria and methods for assessing learning outcomes;
- b. structure of qualifications using units/blocks of competences ([56]) that can be assessed and validated;
- c. classification by field of activity and allocation of an NQF level.

Inclusion in the NQF signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the commission within France Compétences, underwrite the validity and quality of a particular qualification or certificate and ensures parity of esteem between qualifications at the same level independent of the awarding body (the State and other awarding bodies), national/international validity of the qualification or training and other funding schemes in place to acquire them.

Registration is necessary to:

- a. receive funding;
- b. finance validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- c. exercise certain professions and occupations;
- d. enter apprenticeship schemes.

The introduction of the RNCP in 2002 ([57]) opened the possibility for inclusion of industry or sectoral qualifications recognised by the professional branches (*Certificats de qualification professionnelle* – CQPs), diversifying the range of qualifications that could be nationally recognised. However, CQPs did not have a level. As of 2019, CQPs can be registered on demand after the assent of the committee within France Compétences ([58]) in either a) the SR without a level, or b) in the RNCP with a level, thus making them valid nationally and eligible for funding through the CPF. They can be obtained through training or VAE processes, but not in apprenticeship (Cedefop and Centre Inffo, 2019; France Compétences 2021, p. 79) ([59]).

The French qualifications framework is closely associated with the system for validating non-formal and informal learning (VAE), the two being mutually supportive: qualifications included in the RNCP ([60]) can be acquired through validation and need to have a VAE procedure specified. The gradual introduction of units/blocks of competences from 2014 became mandatory in 2019 for all RNCP qualifications to facilitate equivalences and bridges between qualifications. Those units can be assessed through VAE ([61]), allowing adults to acquire a given qualification gradually or by combining a training course with one or more VAE processes (Cedefop and Centre Inffo, 2019).

NQF levels are indicated on qualification documents issued for VET and higher education qualifications, and on private and international qualifications included in the RNCP; EQF levels are included only on some qualification documents. Both NQF and EQF levels are included on Europass certificate supplements, NQF levels are included in higher education diploma supplements and, following the adoption of the new referencing report, EQF levels will be included in RNCP records. All necessary elements (except for ISCED fields) ([62]), according to Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation, are covered by the RNCP.

The French NQF is known and used by education and training institutions and providers in France. They are currently rewriting qualification standards to be expressed in units/blocks of competences. A common working group is in place to better align the learning outcomes of the NQF with the learning outcomes of the new version of the ROME database ([63]) established by the national employment service, *Pôle Emploi*. The

regions, through their involvement with local guidance and counselling schemes and contacts with ONISEP, are mostly concerned with the use of units of competences established in the new NQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). Employers are aware of the levels, though they may not be aware of the NQF itself. Guidance and counselling practitioners and recognition authorities use the national registers in their daily work. Cooperation has been established between the EQF NCP and the National office for guidance (*Office national d'information sur les enseignements et les professions*, ONISEP), French Labour agency (*Pôle emploi*) and ENIC NARIC France. There is interest in the NQF among the general public (pupils and parents), as registration of a qualification in the RNCP is seen as proof of recognition by the State. The NQF registered qualifications are important from the point of view of workers and jobseekers. Financing of training by the CPF is deeply connected with the qualifications registered in the two national registers. There may be also other types of training actions, especially for jobseekers or unqualified people (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020)

The main channels for disseminating information on the NQF and the EQF have been the EQF NCP website and, as of 2019, France Compétences is also hosting the RNCP and SR and interviews for the media.

Referencing to the EQF

The French five-level structure was referenced to the EQF in October 2010 (CNCP, 2010). The evolution of the national qualifications system, many recent policy developments and reforms and the new national qualifications framework eight-level structure established in 2019 called for an updated referencing report. A single/combined report for the referencing of the French qualifications framework to the EQF and for self-certifying the compatibility of the framework with the QF-EHEA was adopted in February 2021.

Important lessons and future plans

The French NQF has evolved through different stages over decades to address new challenges, policy objectives and trends in the national and European context. Being one of the oldest in Europe, the French NQF is embedded in the national context, characterised by 'a long history of labour organisation and social dialogue' (Allais, 2017, p. 465). Its main distinctive feature is the strong labour market focus and, consequently, in the 2002 framework the exclusion of secondary general education qualifications.

The national register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) – set up in 2002 – ratified the separation between qualifications and the training courses that may lead to them and opened up to a wider range of awarding bodies. Given that the French qualifications system and, in particular, that relationships between qualifications were gradually shaped by stakeholder negotiations and agreements linking qualification levels to occupations and wage levels, updating the level structure was a lengthy process. The new eight-level structure and learning-outcomes-based level descriptors, adopted in 2019, have brought the French framework closer to the EQF, increasing comparability between French qualifications and those in other European countries. The revised framework from 2019 is broader in scope. It not only includes vocational and professional qualifications from VET and higher education with the objective of professional integration, but also upper secondary general and technological baccalaureates (*baccalauréat général and technologique*) are now included in the framework and assigned level 4 as they 'constitute a social indicator of level for the labour market, even without a professional contextualisation'; they legitimate entry into higher education. From a European perspective this is an important development as now most European NQFs include this type of reference qualification in their frameworks. As in some other countries, level 1 does not have a descriptor and is not linked to the EQF and level 2 is currently empty and does not include any qualification.

Developments related to the French NQF since 2002 illustrate the need for NQFs to evolve continuously to stay relevant. Three main trends have been noted in the evolution of the qualifications system in France: the remarkable diversification of the range of qualifications recognised by the State; the shift in the object of recognition from duration of training to learning outcomes; and more recently, in light of concerns about the

proliferation of qualifications, the decrease in the number of qualifications and the strong encouragement of providers to create common qualifications, share blocks of competences between different qualifications and to operate within networks.

The conception of what can be considered a qualification in France may also be subject to change. Departing from the strong emphasis on 'full qualifications' (*qualifications complètes*), developments in recent years have included several initiatives to make qualification and training pathways more flexible: the introduction of units/blocks of competences as identifiable parts of qualifications that can be assessed and validated independently – now mandatory for all new qualifications registered in the RNCP; the personal training account (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) which follows the same logic of breaking down qualifications into blocks of learning outcomes that can be acquired gradually (with the help of the CPF); and the introduction of a new SR – in addition to the existing RNCP – for inclusion of smaller awards not levelled. One of the aims of the revised framework and qualifications registers is to support recognition of competences acquired through another awarding body (France Compétences, 2021, p. 34) and, in higher education, recognition of cross-disciplinary competences in degrees of an equivalent level (France Compétences, 2021, p. 84). In the years to come, developing the system of blocs of competences for all NQF qualifications would facilitate clarity and transparency between different types of qualifications, especially within the same occupation or profession as well as equivalences and pathways between RNCP and non-levelled qualifications in the SR, and access pathways to a qualification. However, this would greatly depend on the willingness of, and agreements between, providers on setting up such equivalences. The new legal framework gives France Compétences the ability to remove those qualifications with similar content for which bridging pathways cannot be established (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

The role of the CNCP until recently and, since 2019, that of the new commission within France Compétences replacing the CNCP as 'gatekeeper' of the French framework, has been important for two reasons: it has supported the credibility of registered qualifications and ownership of registration decisions across a wide range of stakeholders due to the quadripartite composition of these structures.

The revised French qualifications framework was referenced to the EQF and self-certified its compatibility with the QF-EHEA in February 2021. A single/combined report was prepared combining both processes. This is

now a common practice.

Main sources of information

- The EQF NCP for France is hosted by France Compétences:
<https://www.francecompetences.fr/>
- National register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) and Specific register (SR):
https://www.francecompetences.fr/recherche_certificationprofessionnelle/
- CNCP (2010). *Referencing of the national framework of French certification in the light of the European framework of certification for lifelong learning.* <https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2020-06/France%20Referencing%20Report%20.pdf>
- France Compétences (2021). *The French qualifications framework to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework for European Higher Education Area.* <https://europa.eu/europass/en/reports-referencing-national-qualifications-frameworks-eqf>

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	<p>Doctorate degrees (Doctorat)</p> <p>Professional certificates/titles level 8 (Titres professionnels)</p> <p>Professional certificates/titles are awarded by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social integration; they are registered by law and may be classified at any level</p> <p>Professional qualification certificates - level 8 (Certificat de qualifications professionnelles - CQP)</p> <p>CQPs are under the responsibility of social partners; they are registered on demand and may be classified at all levels.</p> <p>Professional qualifications on demand - level 8</p> <p>Qualifications registered on demand are awarded by public or private bodies and may be classified at all levels.</p>	8
7	<p>Master degrees (Grade de Master)</p> <p>National diplomas at level 7</p> <p>An overview of national diplomas and vocational certificates registered by law is available in Annex 9 of the 2021 referencing report (France Compétences, 2021, p. 103).</p> <p>Professional diploma in engineering with Master degree (diplôme / titre d'ingénieur)</p> <p>Professional certificates/titles - level 7 (Titres professionnels)</p> <p>Professional qualification certificates - level 7 ((CQP))</p> <p>Professional qualifications on demand - level 7</p>	7

6	Bachelor degrees (Grade Licence) Bachelor (Licence) University Bachelor of technology (Bachelor universitaire de technology - BUT) National diploma in arts (Diplôme National d'Art - DNA) National diplomas at level 6 <p>An overview of national diplomas and vocational certificates registered by law is available in Annex 9 of the 2021 referencing report (France Compétences, 2021, p. 103).</p>	6
	Professional certificates/titles - level 6 (Titres professionnels) Professional qualification certificates - level 6 (CQP) Professional qualifications on demand - level 6	
5	Undergraduate technician certificates (Brevet de technicien supérieur - BTS) Undergraduate technician certificates in agriculture (Brevet de technicien supérieur agricole - BTSA) Undergraduate diploma in technology (Diplôme universitaire de technologie - DUT) National diploma 'One of the best workers in France' (Diplôme d'Etat 'Un des meilleurs ouvriers de France') National diplomas at level 5 <p>An overview of national diplomas and vocational certificates registered by law is available in Annex 9 of the 2021 referencing report (France Compétences, 2021, p. 103).</p>	5
	Professional certificates/titles - level 5 (Titres professionnels) Professional qualification certificates - level 5 (CQP) Master craftsman qualifications issued by the Chambers of Trades (Brevets de maîtrise - Chambre des métiers) Professional qualifications on demand - level 5	

National baccalaureate diploma - general, technological or vocational education (National baccalaureate diploma - general, technological or vocational education)

Applied arts certificates (Brevet des métiers d'art - BMA)

Professional certificate for youth, adult education and sports (Brevet professionnel de la jeunesse, de l'éducation nationale et du sport - BPJEPS)

Higher technical diploma in craftsmanship (Brevet technique des métiers)

Secondary vocational certificates at level 4

An overview of national diplomas and vocational certificates registered by law is available in Annex 9 of the 2021 referencing report (France Compétences, 2021, p. 103).

Professional certificates/titles - level 4 (Titres professionnels)

Professional qualification certificates - level 4 (CQP)

Professional qualifications on demand - level 4

3	<p>Secondary vocational certificates (Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle - CAP; Brevet d'études professionnelles - BEP)</p> <p>BEP and BEPA are intermediary qualifications granted to young people who have passed the BEP exam and are preparing for the vocational baccalaureate.</p> <p>Secondary vocational certificates in agriculture (Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle agricole - CAPA; Brevet d'études professionnelles agricoles - BEPA)</p> <p>BEP and BEPA are intermediary qualifications granted to young people who have passed the BEP exam and are preparing for the vocational baccalaureate.</p> <p>Secondary vocational certificate for youth, adult education and sports (Certificat professionnel de la jeunesse, de l'éducation nationale et du sport - CPJEPS)</p> <p>Certificate issued by the Chambers of Trades and crafts (Certificat technique des métiers - CTM)</p> <p>Secondary vocational certificates at level 4</p> <p>An overview of national diplomas and vocational certificates registered by law is available in Annex 9 of the 2021 referencing report (France Compétences, 2021, p. 103).</p> <p>Professional certificates/titles - level 3 (Titres professionnels)</p> <p>Professional qualification certificates - level 3 (CQP)</p> <p>Professional qualifications on demand - level 3</p>	3
N/A	No French qualifications and certificates at these levels	2
N/A	No French qualifications and certificates at these levels	1

Acronyms

CNPC	<i>Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle</i> [National committee on vocational qualifications]
CPC	<i>Commission professionnelle consultative</i> [Vocational advisory committee]
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF- EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
RNCP	<i>Registre national de la certification professionnelle</i> [national register of vocational and professional qualifications]
ROME	<i>Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois</i> [register of occupations in the French labour market]
RS (RSCH)	<i>Répertoire spécifique des certifications et habilitations</i> [specific register of awards]
VAE	<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> [validation of non-formal and informal learning]

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Notes

[1] Besides the general and technological baccalauréat, which are being revised, there is also a third type of upper secondary school-leaving examination: the professional/vocational baccalauréat.

[2] Law 2018-166 of 8 March 2018 on student orientation and success [Loi n° 2018-166 du 8 mars 2018 relative à l'orientation et à la réussite des étudiants]. JORF, No 0057, 9.3.2018.

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[3] <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/el/news-and-press/news/france-excellence-vet-new-generation-trades-and-qualifications-campuses>

[4] Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation [Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale]. JORF, 18.1.2002, p. 1008. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

[5] One important trend witnessed over the last 40 years is diversification of the nationally recognised qualifications and an increase in requests for registering of qualifications by private providers.

[6] Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future [Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel]. JORF, No 0205, 6.9.2018.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

[7] Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational qualifications [Décret n° 2019-14 du 8 janvier 2019 relatif au cadre national des certifications professionnelles]. JORF, No 0007, 9.1.2019.

https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=6A9D2FCF7FB127AC6021BD782B475904.tplgfr34s_2?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037964754&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id&idJO=JORFCONT000037964593

[8] The development of this classification was closely related to labour market needs and a need for a statistical tool to measure the shares of the population to be enrolled at different levels of education. The hierarchy of diplômes was used as a starting point for the classification, as it had more stable definitions. It was then transposed into training levels linked to corresponding occupations and jobs, facilitating statistical analysis (Paddeu et al., 2018).

[9] The RNCP (Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles) includes all qualifications, recognised by the State and/or social partners, that attest the ability to exercise a professional activity, independently

from the learning route used to acquire them.

[10] Higher education diplomas and degrees (levels 5, 6, 7 and 8) are considered professional qualifications due to their strong labour-market orientation.

[11] Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future.

[12] The NQF is a part of the national qualification system that includes two registers: the RNCP, including qualifications with assigned levels, and the Specific Register (RS), including qualifications without levels, but with possible connections with the NQF through qualifications blocks (France Compétences, 2021, p. 6)

[13] A guide on how to use the criteria for qualifications registered on demand is available [here](#).

[14] In the referencing report 2021 the term national professional qualifications framework is used (France Compétences, 2021).

[15] The descriptor concerns progression in knowledge to be able to carry out professional activities at the level (processes, materials, terminology relating to one or more fields, and theoretical knowledge) (France Compétence, 2021, p. 8).

[16] The descriptor concerns progression:

[17] The descriptor concerns progression in the following areas: (i) organisation of work; (ii) reaction to unforeseen situations; (iii) awareness of the complexity of the environment; (iv) understanding of interactions in activities in other professional fields in order to organise one's work, to correct it or give explanations to supervised staff; (v) participation in collective work; and (vi) level of supervision (France Compétences, 2021, p. 8).

[18] The NQF 'defines the level of qualification associated with each professional certification according to criteria for grading the competences necessary for the practice of professional activities' (D. 6113-18 French Labour Code) (France Compétences, 2011, p. 35).

[19] In the five-level structure in use until 2019 both master and doctorate programmes were assigned at level I.

[20] In the Referencing report the term competency is used. It is understood as the ability to combine a set of knowledge, expertise and interpersonal skills in order to perform a task or activity. In the case of registration in the RNCP, it has a professional purpose and is contextualised. Competency relates to the notion of combining (rather than accumulating) knowledge, expertise and interpersonal skills (France Compétences, 2021, p. 4).

[21] Bachelor, master and doctorate national degrees (the licence-master-doctorate model, LDM).

[22] At all levels but doctorates, bachelor level corresponds to 180 credits

and master level to 300 credits (France Compétences, p. 75).

[23] Specialisms are complemented by cross-disciplinary competences common to all degrees at a specific level, both forming the higher education national records per degree registered in the RNCP.

[24] Decree of 30 July 2018 relating to the national bachelor degree (licence). <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037291166> & Decree of 30 July 2018 modifying the decree of 24 January 2014 fixing the national qualifications framework for the delivery of the national bachelor, professional bachelor and master degrees.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037291136>

[25] Law No 2018-166 of 8 March 2018 relating to career guidance and success of students.

[26] Delivered by institutes of technology, IUTs, integrating the existing undergraduate DUT level 5 diploma.

[27] Decree of 6 December 2019 reforming the professional bachelor [Arrêté du 6 décembre 2019 portant réforme de la licence professionnelle], Article 20.

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[28] Law 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy [Loi No 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale]. JORF, No 0055, 6.3.2014, p. 4848.

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[29] Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future.

[30] Decree 2002-726 of 12 June modifying the conditions of the education code relevant to the recognition and acquisition of units of competences of five vocational qualifications [professional aptitude certificate (CAP), professional certificate (BP), vocational baccalaureate, applied arts certificate and specialisation certificate (MC)].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000041996366?r=KmxywFXUxm>

[31] Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation.

[32] The CNCP consisted of a chairperson, 16 ministerial representatives, 10 social partners, three elected representatives of the consular chambers, three elected representatives of the regions, and 12 qualified persons, a general rapporteur and two deputy rapporteurs. The members were appointed by the French prime minister, for a renewable five-year term (CNCP, 2010).

[33] Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future.

[34] The Labour Code, Article L6113-1.

[35] Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications.

[36] Decree of 26 February, 2019 appointing the commission in charge of vocational and professional certification within France Compétences.

[https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?
cidTexte=JORFTEXT000038191674&categorieLien=id](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000038191674&categorieLien=id)

[37] Decree of 26 February 2019 appointing the committee in charge of professional certification within France Compétences.

[38] This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning; France (Mathou, C., 2019).

[39] In addition to VAE, there is a mechanism for the recognition of professional and personal experience, granting access to a programme through exemption from normal requirements (at higher education level, this procedure is known as Validation des acquis professionnels et personnels (VAPP); the skill audits or bilan de compétences aimed at identifying skills and competences acquired during one's professional life without targeting certification and without an assessment procedure; and other types of competence portfolios developed outside of validation procedures.

[40] All legislative acts and labour code articles regulating aspects of the VAE process for vocational qualifications, higher education degrees and other higher education diplomas issued by certifying ministries, as well as VAE in the public sector, are listed [here](#).

[41] The 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future defines (Article 4) four types of lifelong vocational training: training schemes; competence assessments; schemes providing VAE; and apprenticeship schemes (Referencing report 2021, p. 22).

[42] Law No 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy. Decree No 2014-1354 of 12 November 2014 on measures regarding the validation of acquired experience [Décret No 2014-1354 du 12 novembre 2014 portant diverses mesures relatives à la validation des acquis de l'expérience]. JORF, No 0263, p. 19184, 14.11.2014).

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[43] Law No 2016-1088 of 8 August 2016 on labour, modernisation of social dialogue and securisation of professional career [Loi n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016 relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels]. JORF, No 0184, 9.8.2016. [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?
cidTexte=LEGITEXT000033000929&dateTexte=20160908](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000033000929&dateTexte=20160908)

[44] Annex of the draft finance law on vocational training 2021, pp. 132-135.

[45] Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future.

[46] All legal acts regulating VAE are available [here](#).

[47] These are secondary and higher education qualifications and continuing training qualifications issued by the Ministry of Labour.

[48] CPCs are inter-ministerial advisory bodies involving representatives of employers, employees, local authorities and professionals.

[49] For example, qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Culture are not developed through, and following recommendation from, advisory bodies.

[50] Qualifications, independent of their origin, are included in the national registers (France Compétences, 2021, p. 6) in line with the respective criteria in place for the RNCP à <https://www.cti-commission.fr/communication-concernant-la-procedure-denregistrement-des-fiches-rncp> and the Specific register à https://www.francecompetences.fr/app/uploads/2020/12/FC_Guide_RS_final_interactif.pdf.

[51] Law 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy.

[52] Examples include accreditations resulting from a legal obligation and required to work in a particular profession (e.g. electrician accreditations); those highly valued in certain fields and recommended by social partners or certain bodies (e.g. qualification in copper welding as per standard NF EN ISO 9606-3); and those related to a homogeneous set of competences required in one or more occupations and that help to access the labour market (e.g. Certificat Voltaire (spelling skills)).

[53] Both registers are constantly updated; in late 2020 there were 4 841 active records (2 744 qualifications registered by law and 2 097 on demand) and 15 726 inactive records (France Compétences, 2021, p. 5).

[54] In the former system, it was a more detailed fiche à for each university which provided, for instance, a master degree in economy, there were 20 fiches with small optional variations; now there is only one fiche.

[55] Decree No 2018-1172 of 18 December 2018 on the conditions for registering vocational qualifications and certifications and authorisations in the national registers [Décret no 2018-1172 du 18 décembre 2018 relatif aux conditions d'enregistrement des certifications professionnelles et des certifications et habilitations dans les répertoires nationaux]. JORF, No 0294, 20.12.2018.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2018/12/18/2018-1172/jo/texte>

[56] A unit/block of competences is an 'identified part of a vocational

'qualification', defined as a 'homogeneous and coherent set of competences contributing to carrying out a professional activity autonomously, and which can be assessed and validated' (Labour Code, Art. L6113-1).

[57] Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation.

[58] CQPs are designed by joint employment and vocational training committees (CPNEFP, Commission paritaire nationale de l'emploi et de la formation professionnelle) and can be submitted for inclusion in the RNCP by the CPNEFPs.

[59] More information [here](#).

[60] A main distinction is made between diplomas, degrees and qualifications issued on behalf of the State and referring to national laws (Ministries of National Education, Higher Education and Agriculture); they are included by entitlement and eligible for automatic inclusion; 'private' qualifications are included by request (i.e. on demand) and awarded by education and training providers, chambers and social partners in their own name (Paddeu et al., 2018).

[61] the validity of the VAE assessment is without time limit from an individual perspective as long as the qualification they relate to is active/offered.

[62] The law retained the RNCP, which classifies vocational/professional qualifications by level and by sector of activity (France Compétences, 2021, p. 36).

[63] Register of occupations in the French labour market (Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois, ROME)

Related content



2020

France - European inventory of NQFs 2020

European inventory of NQF



France