

NQF state of play



Portugal 2022

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Overview

Stage of development: Operational stage

NQF linked to EQF: 

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training and from the national system for the recognition, validation and certification of competences.

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Ministerial order on the NQF (2009)
(in Portuguese)

NQF/EQF website:

 [Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

-  [National qualifications catalogue](#)
-  [Database of higher education courses and institutions](#)
-  [Portal displaying learning opportunities](#)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

In Portugal in 2020, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product was the same as the EU average (5.0 %). The country has an average level of participation in early childhood education and care (92.9 % in 2021), while the rate of early leaving from education and training has decreased significantly in recent years (from 23.7 % in 2011 to 5.9 % in 2021), and is now well below the EU average (9.7 % in 2021). In 2021, tertiary education attainment (age 25-34) (47.5 %) was higher than in the EU-27 (41.2 %); this is an increase of 20 % compared to 2011 (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). Participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) is relatively low (38.7 % in 2020), while in post-secondary and short-cycle tertiary education the vocational pathways are the only option for learners ([1]). In 2021, the employment rate of VET graduates (25-34 years old) was 65.4 % (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

The National Qualifications System (*Sistema Nacional de Qualificações - SNQ*) ([2]) has several elements, including the national qualifications catalogue (CNQ), the QNQ, the national credit system for VET, a network of adult learning centres (*Qualifica* centres) and an instrument for lifelong development that records individual qualifications and competences (*Qualifica* passport). The national system for recognising non-formal and informal learning (RVCC) was integrated into the QNQ and reformed, to better address training, guidance and skills validation. Since 2021, with the [vocational training and qualification agreement](#), Portugal has placed a special focus on boosting post-secondary training at QNQ level 5, aiming to promote social, professional and academic mobility. The agreement provided the basis for apprenticeships ([3]) and certified modular training ([4]) to be introduced at this level. Since 2022, it has also been possible for post-secondary qualifications to be obtained through an RVCC process ([5]). The [Ativar.PT programme](#) supports the expansion of apprenticeships; the revision, flexibilisation and relaunch of technological specialisation courses (CETs) at QNQ level 5 ([6]); and the hiring of young people holding a qualification at this or a higher level ([7]). The aims of '[Recuperar Portugal, Construindo o futuro](#)' (the Portuguese recovery and resilience plan), are:

- a. to reduce the rate of adults, including young people, that do not

hold at least a qualification at QNQ levels 3 and 4;

- b. to ensure that 60 % of 20-year-olds attend higher education and 50 % of those aged 30-34 have a higher education qualification;
- c. to increase the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

1.2. NQF legal basis

The 2007 and 2017 decree-laws on the national qualifications system ([8]) define the governance structure, processes and main elements regarding qualifications in Portugal. The main instruments of the system are the QNQ and the national qualifications catalogue (CNQ). The QNQ was adopted in 2009 by [Ordinance No 782/2009](#) on the NQF and came into force in October 2010. It is well integrated into the legislation governing education and training. Since 2021, legislation has been adopted introducing diploma and certificate templates (in electronic format) for basic education (QNQ/EQF level 2), secondary education (QNQ/EQF levels 3 and 4), adult education and training courses (leading to QNQ levels 1 to 4 (EFA), CETs (QNQ level 5) and qualifications awarded through an RVCC process. They include the obligation for the QNQ/EQF levels to be mentioned on the diplomas and certificates of all these qualifications, and of apprenticeships at QNQ levels 4 and 5 ([9]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Policy objectives

Developed within the context of reforms aiming to raise the qualification levels of the whole population, the QNQ is seen as 'both a central anchoring device and a mechanism that drives forward the process of reform' (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, 2011). It responds to the need to integrate and coordinate qualifications from the various education and training subsystems (general education, VET, higher education and those awarded through the validation of non-formal learning) into a single classification and the need to promote lifelong learning. It also aims to improve the transparency and comparability of qualifications at the national and European levels, and their labour market relevance (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The framework's specific objectives include (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, 2011):

- a. strengthening the integration between general education and VET (programmes leading to double certification) through permeability mechanisms and coordination;
- b. developing and promoting RVCC mechanisms, and supporting flexible training pathways and participation in lifelong learning;
- c. organising education and training pathways into short modular units that can be certified independently, aiming to increase adult learners' participation and education attainment;
- d. developing monitoring, coordination and quality control mechanisms for education and training.

The main functions of the QNQ are to improve the transparency and comparability of qualifications at the national and international levels and to contribute to and drive innovation and reforms (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills (cognitive or practical) and attitudes. The term competence is used as an overarching concept within the national qualifications system, defined as the ‘recognised capacity to mobilise knowledge, skills and attitudes in contexts of work, professional development, education and personal development’ (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, 2011). The attitudes descriptor is defined as ‘the ability to carry out tasks and solve problems of lesser or greater degrees of complexity and involving various levels of autonomy and responsibility’; it is divided into the subdomains of responsibility and autonomy ([Ordinance No 782/2009](#)).

The upper secondary general education school leaving certificate, giving access to higher education, has been assigned to QNQ/EQF level 3, to distinguish it from QNQ/EQF level 4 secondary education qualifications obtained through programmes leading to double certification or through secondary education programmes including a professional internship of at least 6 months.

EQF levels promote the transparency and comparability of national qualifications across and outside Europe, and foster the international mobility of workers and learners. Transparency has also improved, because qualification levels provide insights into the relative positions (and values) of certificates and diplomas (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The QNQ is a comprehensive framework with eight levels, including all qualifications from the various education and training subsystems, regardless of means of access: basic, upper secondary and higher education; vocational training; and RVCC. Private/non-regulated qualifications have not yet been included.

Policy developments have significantly changed the qualification types included at QNQ level 5 (Section). Apart from the post-secondary non-tertiary diploma in technological specialisation ([10]), apprenticeship+ ([11]) and certified modular training courses were introduced at QNQ

level 5 in 2022, while post-secondary qualifications can be also obtained through an RVCC process. Specialised advanced technical courses (CTeSP) ([12]) are considered to be short-cycle higher education. They are designed using the learning-outcomes approach, but no level has yet been assigned.

Between the beginning of 2020 and July 2022, 10 qualifications at QNQ levels 4 and 5 were integrated into the framework and 177 qualifications were updated (53 at level 2, 122 at level 4 and 2 at level 5) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

The QNQ has been a driving force in incorporating the learning-outcomes approach into education and training. Fine-tuning qualifications' learning outcomes with the QNQ level descriptors is a challenging task and is a work in progress; it includes upgrading general education qualifications and VET qualifications at QNQ levels 2, 4 and 5.

In 2017, the '[Students' profile](#) at the end of compulsory education was introduced, promoting transversal and interdisciplinary competences that are interrelated and mobilise a solid set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. The profile concerns general and VET programmes, apart from apprenticeship programmes (Cedefop, 2021) ([13]). [Decree-Law No 54/2018](#) has fostered school autonomy and curriculum flexibility. It introduced a new paradigm for student-centred learning consistent with the learning-outcomes approach in qualification design, promoting inclusive education and linking VET with general education. This approach is increasingly taken in compulsory general education and VET (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023) ([14]).

In general education, the revision of the curriculum structure for basic and secondary education led to the definition of new programmes and curriculum outcome targets. The curriculum outcome targets are focused on the knowledge and essential skills students need to master in the different school years and cycles. The 'essential learning' of each school subject, the reference for delivering new curricula, are in line with the student profile at the end of compulsory education and expressed in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes), allowing for learner-centred and inclusive teaching and learning practices.

The VET sector has seen the most progress, with reforms aimed at developing qualifications standards and curriculum development. VET qualifications are included in the CNQ at levels 2, 4 and 5, and are

organised into units of competence ([15]). The latest methodological guidebook for the [design and revision of qualifications](#) at levels 2, 4 and 5 of the QNQ was published in 2020 (ANQEP, 2020), re-emphasising the focus on skills and learning outcomes. Since 2016, the National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP) has organised several training courses for teachers and trainers on the implementation of the learning-outcomes approach (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Since 2020, the 'essential learning' for professional and for specialised artistic teaching courses have also been developed and approved. They are described in terms of learning outcomes, by year/cycle and module.

Higher education institutions are responsible for implementing learning outcomes within their study programmes, so the process differs from one institution to another. According to one study (Cedefop, 2016), the accreditation agency A3ES for the higher education sector does not emphasise the importance of learning outcomes in the accreditation process.

3.4. Quality assurance arrangements

Quality assurance arrangements for QNQ qualifications have been put in place. The authorities responsible are ANQEP, the General Directorate for Higher Education, the General Directorate for Education, the General Directorate for Employment and Labour Relations and the Agency for the Accreditation and Assessment of Higher Education (A3ES). The involvement of sector qualification councils in the redesign/revision of qualifications supports quality assurance (Cedefop, 2020).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The QNQ is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

QNQ coordination is shared between the National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP) and the General Directorate for Higher Education for qualifications at levels 5 to 8. The General Directorate for Education is consulted on general education qualifications. ANQEP has been nominated as the EQF national coordination point (NCP), the leading structure for QNQ implementation. Its responsibilities include referencing the QNQ to the EQF, providing access to information and guidance on how national qualifications are levelled to the QNQ and encouraging the participation of all relevant stakeholders (higher education and VET representatives, social partners and sectoral representatives). There are no human resources dedicated exclusively to the EQF NCP; the staff working on the QNQ are also involved in other ANQEP technical departments and services. This arrangement allows flexibility and the development of synergies (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

ANQEP, operating under the labour and education ministries, coordinates the national qualifications system ([16]) and is responsible for the implementation of education and training policies and the RVCC system.

ANQEP is supported by 18 sectoral councils for qualification ([17]), which are involved in defining qualifications and competences, including new qualifications in the qualifications catalogue, and updating existing ones. If an accepted proposal concerns a new qualification, a three-stage process takes place leading to the publication of the new qualification in the *Official Bulletin For Labour And Employment* and inclusion in the catalogue (Cedefop and European Commission, DG Employment and Industrial Relations, 2019).

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

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

The comprehensive national system for recognition, validation and certification of competences (*Reconhecimento, validação e certificação de competências*, RVCC) was introduced in 2001 to increase education and training attainment and employability. The RVCC system has been incorporated into the national qualifications system and framework (Guimarães, 2019). Since 2022, RVCC has also led to post-secondary qualifications at QNQ/EQF level 5 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). RVCC certificates can be registered in the Qualifica passport. Qualifications acquired through an RVCC process have the same value as those awarded in formal education and training. However, RVCC qualifications are less likely to lead to an increase in salary or to finding a job that requires a higher level of qualifications (Guimarães, 2019).

RVCC has the following two main pathways (regulated by [Ordinance No 61/2022](#)):

- a. the education RVCC process, leading to a school leaving certificate (levels 1, 2 and 3 of the QNQ/EQF), which is based on the key competences standards used in formal education and training for adult pathways;
- b. the professional RVCC process, leading to double certification (school and professional certification at levels 2, 4 and 5 of the QNQ/EQF). Professional RVCC uses a competence and a training standard based on those used in the formal VET system, and are part of the CNQ. As of April 2020 there were 171 qualifications with professional RVCC ([\[18\]](#)).

In higher education (levels 6 to 8 of the QNQ/EQF), validation is generally linked to the credit system and the module-based structure of courses and degrees. Students can obtain European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) credits through validation that can be used to grant exemptions from part of a degree course. These credits are valid only in the programme of studies in which a student is enrolled. There is a limit to validation processes of up to one third of the total number of ECTS credits relevant for a particular course (Guimarães, 2019).

5.2. Credit systems

The use of learning outcomes in qualification design also enabled the creation of the national credit system for VET ([Ordinance No 47/2017](#)), aligned with some of the ECVET principles and aimed at increasing the permeability between VET pathways and higher education. This enables the allocation of credit points to QNQ qualifications at levels 2, 4 and 5, and to certified training included in the integrated information system for the management of education and training provision (SIGO), compliant with the quality criteria in place ([[19](#)]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The QNQ has reached the operational stage. The framework provides a map of all nationally recognised qualifications; a platform for cooperation by stakeholders across education, training and employment; and a reference point for the development and review of standards and curricula and for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Important work has been done to indicate QNQ/EQF levels on qualifications and promote learning outcomes. No comprehensive qualifications database has yet been developed (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022)

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

Since 2021, there have been significant legal developments (Section), introducing the obligation for QNQ/EQF levels to be mentioned on the diplomas and certificates of qualifications in basic and secondary education (QNQ/EQF levels 1 to 4), apprenticeships (at QNQ levels 4 and 5), CETs (QNQ level 5) and adult education and training courses (EFA), and on those of qualifications awarded through an RVCC process ([20]). QNQ/EQF levels are indicated on some higher education qualifications. It is mandatory for QNQ/EQF levels to be indicated on certificate and diploma supplements, such as Europass supplements. In databases, QNQ/EQF levels are indicated on all VET and some general education qualifications, while they are not indicated on higher education qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.3. NQF dissemination

The EQF NCP has developed a support guide to assist stakeholders and education and training providers in using the QNQ. It offers guidance on allocating qualifications to the adequate QNQ/EQF level and on designing qualifications, based on learning outcomes. The EQF NCP also disseminates leaflets and flyers aiming to reach a wider audience, including employers. Cooperation between the EQF NCP and the Euroguidance Centre has been increased. The website of the national qualifications catalogue has been updated, and includes information about the QNQ/EQF ([21]).

6.4. Qualifications databases and registers

No comprehensive database that includes all QNQ qualifications has yet been set up.

The national qualifications catalogue ([Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações, CNQ](#)) ([22]) has been developed as a strategic management tool for VET provision and adult learning with strong links to the QNQ, targeting education and training providers, learners and parents (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). In March 2023, the CNQ included all QNQ-levelled VET qualifications (392 in total), 3 858 competence units and 8 668 short-term training units; it also includes international qualifications, which are partial qualifications. It offers information in Portuguese on the title, field of study, QNQ/EQF level, learning outcomes, credit points and ways to acquire each qualification. The catalogue is continually updated by ANQEP; the active involvement of sectoral councils ensures that the catalogue is quality assured updated content-wise (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The CNQ is connected to the Integrated system of information and management of the education and training programmes (*Sistema Integrado de Informação e Gestão da Oferta Educativa e Formativa - SIGO*), which is the basis for a [portal displaying learning opportunities](#). Users of the portal searching for a learning opportunity related to a CNQ qualification are redirected to the catalogue. All certificates and diplomas awarded at QNQ levels 1 to 5 are registered by the relevant bodies in SIGO. Consequently, individuals' competences and qualifications are displayed in a *Qualifica* passport, which is each user's interface in SIGO. Based on the user's acquired skills and competences, the system suggests the six most relevant learning pathways. SIGO is also used by the employment services for job searches. SIGO and the CNQ are connected to the Europass platform. The CNQ has started providing information on qualifications using the European learning model (ELM) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

A [database of higher education qualifications](#) has also been created by the Directorate-General for Higher Education, disseminating up-to-date information in English and Portuguese on higher education institutions and recognised programmes. The database targets higher education institutions, learners and other stakeholders, and contains 936 short-cycle specialised advanced technical CTeSP courses, 1 515 bachelor's degrees, 59 integrated master's degrees, 2 193 master's degrees and 634 PhDs / doctoral degrees (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

The QNQ levels are widely used in policy documents, for instance in describing qualifications and levels ([23]), while the QNQ is also used in legislation, for example regarding curriculum reorganisation and admission to higher education ([24]). NQF levels and terminology are also used in labour market and transversal policy documents – for example, internship grants, paid by the public employment service, differ depending on the beneficiary's QNQ qualification level ([Ordinance No 206/2020](#)) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

QNQ levels are increasingly used by education and training providers when advertising courses (on their websites and on certificates), and by public employment services and (tentatively) employers when advertising job offers. This has contributed to raising awareness of the QNQ among learners, workers and jobseekers. Non-higher education and training providers are aware of the QNQ as they must use the CNQ and SIGO. An empirical indication that education and training providers, companies, learners, workers and jobseekers are using the QNQ is that the EQF NCP often replies to their questions by phone or email. Recognition of foreign qualifications is granted by reference to qualifications at QNQ levels 2 to 5 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

Although the need for an evaluation study has been discussed since 2019, it has not yet been launched. In the same period, ANQEP has invested in modernising the CNQ; for this reason, it was decided the evaluation to also monitor the impact of the CNQ modernisation (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.7. Impact of the NQF

The QNQ is considered to have improved the transparency and comparability of qualifications, along with public trust in the quality of qualifications. The incorporation of the RVCC system into the QNQ has significantly aided the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. It has also contributed to raising parity of esteem, reducing barriers between subsystems through its comprehensive nature and its focus on placing the same value on qualifications regardless of the way they are obtained. The QNQ has been crucial in incorporating the learning-outcomes approach into education and training, and particularly VET. Through its connection with the national credit system for VET, it has also supported the fostering of permeability among VET pathways and higher education, along with international mobility. In general, VET is organised around the framework. The QNQ promotes dialogue between

stakeholders in education and training and in the labour market via the sectoral councils for qualification (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Referencing to the EQF

In 2011, the QNQ was referenced to the EQF, while higher education qualification levels were self-certified against the qualifications framework in the European higher education area. The process started in 2009, and two separate reports were developed: the first addressed qualifications at levels 1 to 5 of the QNQ (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, 2011); the second addressed those at levels 5 to 8 (Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2011). There are no plans to update the referencing report.

Important lessons and future plans

One main enabling factor for the QNQ's development and implementation is the coherent policy approach adopted by Portugal, which was supported at the highest political levels. The launching of the framework was part of a major reform of education and training that has built up the national qualifications system. This institutional model has ensured better coordination and the more active participation of stakeholders. The development of the CNQ and the reform and incorporation into it of the RVCC system were major steps in this process (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Portugal has achieved significant progress in combating early school leaving, raising education attainment, promoting inclusive education and training, and fostering up- and reskilling, along with lifelong learning.

The main developments since 2020 include the legal requirement to indicate QNQ/EQF levels on all non-higher education qualifications (Section), along with adding new qualifications at QNQ level 5 and expanding the ways that these can be obtained (Sections and) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Raising awareness of learning outcomes and QNQ/EQF levels among different stakeholders (particularly employers) remains a challenge, as does aligning qualifications and curricula with QNQ/EQF descriptors, especially in higher education. Although promoting learning outcomes is driven by VET, they are increasingly introduced in general education through the 'essential learning' of each school subject, and the initiative that promotes school autonomy and curriculum flexibility (Section) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The country is planning to:

- a. further disseminate QNQ to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including those from the labour market;
- b. level international qualifications to the QNQ;
- c. launch a QNQ impact assessment study.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 29/9/2025]

[ANQEP.](#)

[National qualifications catalogue.](#)

[Qualification database for higher education.](#)

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral degree (Doutoramento)	8
7	Master's degree (Mestrado)	7
6	Bachelor's degree (Licenciatura)	6
5	Diploma in technological specialisation - post-secondary non tertiary education (Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica - Qualificação de nível pós secundário não superior)	5
4	Upper secondary education and professional certification (Ensino secundário obtido por percursos de dupla certificação) Upper secondary education and professional internship - minimum 6 months (Ensino secundário vocacionado para prosseguimento de estudos de nível superior acrescido de estágio profissional - mínimo de seis meses)	4
3	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (Ensino secundário vocacionado para prosseguimento de estudos de nível superior)	3
2	Third cycle of basic education (3º ciclo do ensino básico obtido no ensino geral) Third cycle of basic education and professional certification (3º ciclo do ensino básico obtido por percursos de dupla certificação)	2
1	Second cycle of basic education (2º ciclo do ensino básico)	1

Acronyms

ANQEP	Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional (National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training)
EQF	European qualifications framework
CNQ	Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações (national qualifications catalogue)
NQF	national qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
QNQ	Quadro Nacional de Qualificações (Portuguese qualifications framework)
RVCC	<i>reconhecimento, validação e certificação de competências</i> (recognition, validation and certification of competences obtained through formal, non-formal or informal learning)
SIGO	Sistema Integrado de Informação e Gestão da Oferta Educativa e Formativa (integrated information system for the management of education and training provision)
VET	vocational education and training

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Related content

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2022

Portugal - European inventory of NQFs 2022

European inventory of NQF



Portugal