

European Inventory on NQF 2012

BELGIUM

Belgium is in the same situation as the UK in terms of developing and implementing more than one NQF. This reflects the federal structure of Belgium, giving the three communities a wide ranging autonomy in how to organise their education, training and qualifications systems. While the Flemish- and the French-speaking communities have been working on national frameworks since 2005-06, the German-speaking community has only recently decided to start work in this area. The Flemish and the French-speaking communities have been following different pathways, reflecting the substantial institutional and political differences in education and training between the two. The 2011 version of this report questioned whether some form of link between the two frameworks could be envisaged, potentially providing added value to Belgian citizens for mobility within in the country. This challenge has now, July 2012 (¹), been addressed by the adoption of an amendment to the Belgian Federal Law on the general structure of the education system. This amendment states that the EQF levels will be used as a common reference for the three communities in Belgium. The linkages will be further enhanced by the adoption of broadly similar basic principles for the frameworks of Flanders and the French-speaking community. Differently from the UK, however, the three Belgian regions will reference separately to the EQF.

(¹) 3 augustus 2012 – Wet tot wijziging van de gecoördineerde wetten van 31 december 1949 op het toekennen van de academische graden en het programma van de universitaire examens en van de wet van 7 juli 1970 betreffende de algemene structuur van het <hoger> <onderwijs>

Belgium (Flanders)

Introduction

On 30 April 2009 the Flemish Parliament and government in Belgium adopted an act on the Qualification Structure (The Flemish government, 2009) ⁽²⁾ (*kwalificatiestructuur*) introducing a comprehensive qualifications framework. The framework, based on an eight-level structure described by the two main categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility, was formally referenced to the EQF in June 2011. The Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) further distinguishes between 'educational and professional qualifications', stressing that, in principle, both categories can be placed at all eight levels of the framework.

While the FQF was seen as a precondition for carrying out the referencing to the EQF, it was launched as an instrument for improving the national qualifications system. It is an integrated framework for professional and educational qualifications at all levels, including traditional universities. The overall objective is to strengthen the transparency of qualifications and to clarify mutual relations – vertically and horizontally – between them. It is also to enhance communication on qualifications between education and the labour market and to strengthen permeability between the different learning systems.

The road from formal adoption to implementation has proved more time-consuming than originally predicted. These delays have partly been caused by the need for further legal instruments (implementation decrees), and partly by negotiations with the social partners on how to link and level professional qualifications to the framework. Significant progress has been made during 2011 and 2012, however, and the Flemish framework has now reached an early operational stage.

Main policy objectives

The 2009 Act defines the Flemish qualification system as '... a systematic classification of recognised qualifications based on a generally adopted qualifications framework (FQF)'. The qualification structure (including the qualifications framework) aims at making qualifications and their mutual relations transparent, so that relevant stakeholders in education (students, pupils and providers) and in the labour market (social partners) '(...) can communicate unambiguously about qualifications and the associated competences' (2009 Act, Chapter I, Article 3).

⁽²⁾ *Flemish Act of 30 April 2009 on the qualifications structure.*

http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/files/DecreetVKS_ENG.pdf [accessed 26.11.2012].

The Flemish community of Belgium is responsible for education and training policy and legislation in the Flemish region and for Dutch-speaking education institutions within the Brussels-capital region. The Flemish qualification structure is a classification of Flemish qualifications using an eight-level qualifications framework.

The act underlines that the qualification structure (including the qualifications framework) should act as a reference for quality assurance, for developing and renewing courses, for developing and aligning procedures for recognising acquired competences, and for comparison (nationally and at European levels) of qualifications. The quality assurance of pathways leading to recognised qualifications is being followed up through the establishment of the Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (*Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming, AKOV*). This agency now covers all types and levels of qualification, except higher education qualifications at level 5 to level 8, and is crucial to the overall credibility and success of the overarching framework, domestically as well as at European level (in relation to the EQF). For qualifications at levels 5 to 8 a joint accreditation organisation has been set up together with the Netherlands (*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie, NVAO*).

The act emphasises the role of the qualification structure and framework as a reference for validating non-formal and informal learning and as an orientation point for guidance and counselling.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The Flemish NQF process has involved a broad range of stakeholders at all stages, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training. Other relevant ministries (Ministry of Labour and Social Economy and Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media) have also been involved. From the education and training side, participation by relevant sectors (general education, initial vocational education, continuing vocational education and training, higher education, including short cycle higher education) has been important. The link and overlap⁽³⁾ between professional and higher or general educational qualifications has been a challenge and the active involvement of stakeholders representing the different levels and types of qualifications has been important. A qualifications framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process was developed and put in place (2008). The relationship between the two framework initiatives was discussed throughout the development process and the 2009 Act takes this into account in its terminology, framework descriptors and procedures.

The road from adoption to implementation and operational status has proved to be complex: there are two main reasons for this.

First, the transformation of the 2009 Law into practice required further legal steps and the introduction of a series of 'implementation decrees': A first decree covering professional qualifications at levels 4 and 5 was adopted in late autumn 2012 and gave the mandate to start linking these professional qualifications to the FQF. A second decree covering professional qualifications above level 5 is currently under preparation and is expected to be

⁽³⁾ This overlap results from the fact that professional qualifications are integrated in educational qualifications, outside higher education at levels 6-8. It is being acknowledged that further alignment between professional and educational qualifications is needed.

put in force in 2013, making it possible to include these qualifications in the framework. A third decree for educational qualifications levels 1 to 4 is also expected in 2013.

Second, clarification of the role of the social partners in relation to the linking of qualifications to the framework was needed and required substantial effort to be resolved. Flemish professional qualifications are developed within a tripartite system giving the social partners, in the context of the Social and Economic Committee (SERV), a decisive role. All professional qualifications build on competence standards defined and approved by the social partners. Professional qualification has to reflect these competences and no single qualification can be approved without the active input and approval of the social partners. The 2009 Law did not specify in detail how the social partners would contribute to the levelling of qualifications and so it was necessary to agree on how to approach this task. A general agreement – between the government and the SERV – on how to proceed was reached in January 2011. Based on this, the six first professional qualifications were included in the FQF in 2012. More than 50 will have been included by the end of 2012.

While time-consuming and challenging, continuing inclusion of professional qualifications into the FQF can be deemed a success as it demonstrates that stakeholders are fully involved and responsible for the implementation of the framework. The Flemish approach is also interesting as it demonstrates how competence standards developed for occupational purposes are being translated into professional qualifications. Whether it is possible to continue this process for professional qualifications above level 5 remains to be seen and will demonstrate whether the opening up – in principle – towards professional qualifications at levels 6 to 8 can be translated into practice.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The term ‘competence’ plays a significant role in Flemish education, training and employment policies and is used as an overarching concept. Competence and learning outcomes are used as interchangeable terms in education and training.

The descriptors

The Flemish qualifications framework is based on an eight-level structure described by the categories of knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility ⁽⁴⁾. Compared to the EQF, the FQF-descriptors are more detailed, in particular for lower levels. A main difference is that the FQF does not use ‘competence’ as a separate descriptor category but considers it as an overarching term and uses it interchangeably with learning outcomes. A main feature of the Flemish framework is the use of ‘context’ as an explicit element of the descriptors. The context in which an individual is able to function is seen as an important part of any qualification. This can be seen as a criticism of the EQF descriptors which contain contextual elements but fail to treat them explicitly.

⁽⁴⁾ See Annex 3.

The descriptors are used to describe two main categories of qualifications; professional and educational. A professional qualification is based on a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession, and can be achieved both inside and outside education. An educational qualification is based on a set of competences an individual needs to participate in society, to start further education and/or to exercise professional activities. An educational qualification can only be acquired through education and in institutions recognised by the Flemish authorities. The distinction between professional and educational qualifications is applied for all eight levels of the framework; this offers the potential for high level qualifications in parallel to traditional academic institutions.

In referencing the FQF to the EQF in June 2011 it was concluded that, while the two frameworks have been designed for different purposes, and vary in detail and emphasis, they share the same basic principles. The referencing concludes that each level of the FQF contains at least a core that corresponds with the EQF level descriptor at the same level.

The approach adopted in 2009 reflects a development process which started in 2005. A first proposal contained a 10-level structure but – influenced by discussion on the EQF – was reduced to eight levels. The relationship between professional and higher education qualifications featured strongly in discussions. It was acknowledged that, while higher education institutes (universities and university colleges) have a ‘monopoly’ on the bachelor, master and doctorate titles, this does not rule out the parallel (at levels 6-8) placing of vocationally oriented qualifications. Several stakeholders (for example, representing adult education institutions providing higher VET courses for adults) asked explicitly for the placing of particular VET qualifications at levels 5 or 6. The identification of this ‘grey zone’ between academically and vocationally-oriented higher education qualifications resulted in the adoption of a set of descriptors using the same general logic at all levels.

Representatives from higher education argued that the EHEA (Dublin) descriptors would be the best way of describing levels 6 to 8 and allow direct integration of the higher education framework into the new NQF. This was also linked to an argument that learning outcomes at levels 6 to 8 could best be focused on the category of ‘knowledge’. This was not accepted by most stakeholders who recognised the need for broad descriptors covering more qualifications, educational as well as professional.

Another important discussion in the development phase was how to understand the lowest level of the framework. Should there, for example, be an access level leading to level 1? Social partners expressed the fear that introducing a ‘lowest level’ (level 1 or an access level below level 1) could have a negative, stigmatising effect. In the adopted proposal level 1 is defined as starting, not access level.

[Learning outcomes and competences](#)

Progress on practical implementation of the principles of learning outcomes/competences varies, in particular when looking at teaching methodologies and assessment practices. The continuing VET sector is probably the most experienced in this field. A competence-based approach is well integrated, referring to professional requirements in the labour market. The use of competences in initial VET in recent years has been inspired by Dutch developments

(in particular the MBO reform). Discussions between the Social and Economic Committee and the government in 2010 and 2011 on implementing the framework can be seen as part of this process; how can existing occupational competence standards be translated into learning outcomes based professional qualifications and then attributed a level in the FQF? Learning outcomes are also present in general education, for example by the setting of learning objectives in national core curricula. The developments in higher education have been influenced by the Bologna process, but are mainly dependent on initiatives taken by single institutions or associations of higher education institutes. While reflecting a diverse situation, a clear shift to learning outcomes can be observed in Flanders. The insistence on a learning outcomes approach in the Bologna process has partly influenced university practices.

Links to other tools and policies

Validating non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2010, Belgium Flanders) ⁽⁵⁾ is identified as one of the objectives of the NQF, closely linked to the learning outcomes/competence perspective underpinning the framework. Some progress has already been made, involving various institutions covering different parts of the qualifications framework. The process of recognising non-formal and informal learning has been in place in universities and colleges since 2005; it aims to recognise prior learning acquired in external institutions as well as through professional activities. A proof of competences is provided, granting access to further studies or contributing to the award of a degree. The number of individuals using the system is moderate; to date approximately 500 have applied to take part each year. A system of 'certificates of work experience' has been introduced and is coordinated by the Ministry of Work, using professional competence standards (approved by the social partners in the Social and Economic Committee) as reference. This allows people without any diploma to demonstrate their professional skills and competences with a certificate, granted by the Flemish government, as formal proof of professional competence. In the period 2004-10, 2039 certificates were granted. In adult education, education institutions can recognise prior learning as well, but the practice is not widespread. Compared to other countries, notably neighbours France and the Netherlands, the Flemish system has still some way to go for validation to become generally accessible and recognised as credible by the general public. In July 2012, a policy note was published on recognising prior learning; this was developed by the policy stakeholders of Education and Work. Strategic advisory bodies in education, higher education, work and culture gave their advice on the policy note in October-November 2012. A legislative framework for recognition of prior learning is expected in June 2013.

⁽⁵⁾ *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Belgium (Flanders)*. <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77449.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

An interesting development is the development and introduction of an integrated quality assurance system linked to the FQF ⁽⁶⁾. In July 2012 the policy stakeholders of education and work outlined the main elements in an integrated quality assurance system for professional qualifications: what distinguishes this proposal from traditional quality assurance arrangements is its focus on qualifications. The suggestion is to introduce a quality assurance arrangement covering all pathways (*trajecten*) leading to a professional qualification. The quality approach is thus not limited to traditional education and training institutions, but will also cover validation of prior learning (or *Erkennen van Verworven Competenties*/recognition of prior learning). To accomplish this task, the proposal pays particular attention to the articulation of competence objectives ('...to be expressed in a clear and recognisable way...') and the assessment of these ('...clear and transparent assessment criteria known to the candidate; assessment oriented towards competences; the use of varied assessment methods aiming at validity and reliability...'). The proposal can also be seen as a way to open up the FQF to education and training outside the existing formal system. In November 2012 AKOV started to pilot the quality assurance system. It is expected that the pilot will be formalised in a legislative framework in June 2013.

There is currently no explicit link established between the FQF and ECVET.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF was completed in June 2011 (Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training, 2011) ⁽⁷⁾, preparation having been carried out by AKOV, which is also the EQF national coordination point for Flanders. The decision of the Flemish government to reference to the EQF in mid-2011, pending the placing of professional qualifications to the FQF, was discussed by the EQF advisory group. The lack of clarity in professional qualifications made it difficult for other countries to judge how Flemish qualifications compared to their own. Flanders will present an updated referencing report in 2013 which will focus on recent developments in FQF implementation, with particular emphasis on the alignment method and the updated legislative framework in place. Given the developments reported above, this situation is now changing in a positive direction.

⁽⁶⁾ A conceptual note on how to take forward quality assurance for professional qualifications in the context of the FQF was finalised by AKOV in July 2012 (*Een geïntegreerd systeem van externe kwaliteitszorg*). This note outlines a pilot project to be started in November 2012 and completed in June 2013.

⁽⁷⁾ Government of Flanders, Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training. *Referencing the Flemish qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*. Brussels, June 2011.

Table **Level correspondence established between the Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) and the EQF**

FQF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
EQF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Important lessons and the way forward

Although there is a long tradition in Flanders and Belgium of involving stakeholders and social partners in education and training policy and legislation, development and implementation of the FQF required extensive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. Given progress made in the last year, this delay seems now to have been turned into strength. The acceptance and involvement of social partners in the implementation of the framework provides a good basis for future developments.

The FQF can be seen as the first of the new European NQFs – established in response to the EQF – now reaching early operational stage. While far from complete, the Flemish process illustrates the long-term character of NQF developments.

Main sources of information

Flemish Act of 30 April 2009 on the qualifications structure. http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/files/DecreetVKS_ENG.pdf [accessed 6.12.2012].

The Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance acts as NCP.