

European Inventory on NQF 2012

ESTONIA

Introduction

Estonia is implementing a comprehensive national qualifications framework for lifelong learning, the Estonian qualifications framework (EstQF), including all state recognised qualifications (¹). The overarching framework brings together subframeworks for higher education qualifications (²), VET qualifications (³), general education (⁴), and occupational qualifications (⁵).

The subframework for higher education, reflecting the principles of the European higher education area, was adopted in August 2007 and described by the standard of higher education. General descriptors follow the logic of Dublin descriptors, but are adjusted to national needs.

Qualifications at level 5 of the NQF are subject to intensive discussions. A new draft VET Law, which is planned to come into force in 2013, has been prepared. It foresees qualifications at level 5 (both in IVET and CVET). Developing qualifications at this level is seen as crucial to improving permeability between different subsystems (especially VET and HE).

Main policy objectives

The ambition of the NQF in Estonia is twofold; to be a tool for transparency and communication and, at the same time, to be a tool for reforming lifelong learning.

More specifically, the policy objectives addressed by NQF are to:

- improve the link between education/training and labour market;
- increase educational offer and qualification system consistency;
- provide transparency for employers and individuals;
- increase understanding of Estonian qualifications in the country and abroad;
- introduce common quality assurance criteria;
- support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- monitor the supply and demand for learning.

(¹) According to law they have to be defined in learning outcomes qualifications standard (curriculum or professional standard). The awarding institutions (educational institution, professional associations) have to be accredited by state.

(²) Referred to as standard of higher education.

(³) Referred to as vocational education standard.

(⁴) Referred to as national curriculum for basic schools and national curriculum for upper secondary schools.

(⁵) Occupational qualification means a qualification associated with trade, occupation or profession resulting from work-based learning.

It is expected that implementation of an overarching NQF will increase the coherence of education and training and help to introduce coherent methods for standard-setting. Another import policy objective is to increase adult participation in lifelong learning from 11% in 2011 to 17% in 2020, set as a national target ⁽⁶⁾. Early school leaving and drop outs have decreased in last years to 10.8% in 2011, but are still high in the last years of basic education and highest in the first year of vocational education (21.1%). Further decreasing early school leaving (especially among boys) remains an important policy area and an objective for the coming year. A key priority is to improve the quality of education and especially the relevance of VET to the needs of the labour market.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The Estonian NQF has reached an early operational stage, the Ministry of Education and Research and the Estonian Qualifications Authority being the main bodies involved.

The Qualification Authority (*Kutsekoda*) was established in 2001 with the aim of developing the competence-based professional qualifications system, which was put in place in parallel to the existing formal education system under the Ministry of Education and Research.

The Qualifications Authority coordinates 16 professional councils and keeps a register of competence-based qualifications; it cooperates with other institutions, e.g. the National Examination and Qualifications Centre and the Quality Agency for Higher Education.

A permanent platform is to be set up – a steering group – including stakeholders from different subframeworks (e.g. general education, HE, VET, occupational qualifications) and labour market actors to oversee the implementation and evaluate the impact of the EstQF.

The Qualifications Authority acts as national coordination point. It participated in the development of the NQF and referencing of the NQF to the EQF. It disseminates information, and guides and advises various stakeholders in the application of the framework.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NQF is based on eight levels. Level descriptors for lifelong learning are identical to EQF level descriptors. They are defined as knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills (cognitive skills – use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking – and practical skills, i.e. manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and scope of responsibility and autonomy ⁽⁷⁾. More detailed descriptors have been developed in four subframeworks for

⁽⁶⁾https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Education_in_Europe_2020_Strategy#Adult_participation_in_lifelong_learning [accessed 5.12.2012].

⁽⁷⁾ Professions Act (English version) is available on the website of the Estonian Qualifications Authority. <http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus> [accessed 5.12.2012].

general education, initial vocational education, higher education and occupational qualifications.

Two types of qualification are included:

- formal educational qualifications, which are awarded after completion of educational programmes at all levels (general, vocational, higher);
- occupational qualifications ⁽⁸⁾, where individuals are issued a certificate of knowledge, skills and competences required for working in a specific occupation or profession.

Introducing a learning outcomes approach is an important part of the national reform programme for general education, VET and HE. Linked to this is an increased focus on recognition of prior learning.

The learning outcomes of different types of VET are described in the vocational education standard, which came into force in November 2009. Learning outcomes in vocational education correspond to levels 2 to 4 of the NQF and are described with reference to minimum level standards. The learning outcome approach describes professional knowledge and skills as well as transversal skills (communicative, social and self-awareness competence, independence and responsibility). All types of VET will be formally linked with NQF levels by the end of 2013. A new VET Law is expected in 2013, which also envisages level 5 VET qualifications.

Programmes in VET are modularised and outcomes-based. All programmes will be reassessed in the future, taking into consideration possible changes in the occupational (professional) standards, aiming at increased compatibility of educational and professional (occupational) qualifications. There will be step-by-step development in each sector. All initial VET study programmes will be learning outcomes based by 2014.

New learning programmes have been implemented in higher education institutions from September 2009. The Universities Act and Applied Higher Education Institutions Act now allow for accreditation of prior and experiential learning in higher education curricula (European Commission et al., 2010, Estonia, p. 1) ⁽⁹⁾.

Links to other instruments and policies

The Estonian lifelong learning strategy emphasises the principle that all strategic national, regional and local documents should support development of the lifelong learning system, including the recognition of prior learning and work experience. Increasingly, outcomes-based qualifications and programmes allow for recognition of non-formal and informal learning according to relevant regulation in different subsystems. ECTS, is used for higher

⁽⁸⁾ There are 620 occupational qualifications based on occupational standards, which can be placed on levels 2 to 8 of the NQF. They can be gained through formal education, adult education and in-service training. Information obtained from *Referencing of Estonian qualifications and qualifications framework to the EQF*, p. 9.

⁽⁹⁾ *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Estonia*. <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77456.pdf> [accessed 26.11.2012]. Except for final thesis or examination, all other parts of higher education programmes can be proved through recognition of prior learning.

education. In the VET system, a credit point system based on a study week is used, and transition to ECVET is planned (Aarna et al., 2012) ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Referencing to the EQF

Estonia referenced the Estonian qualifications framework to the EQF and self-certified the compatibility of the Estonian qualifications framework for higher education with the QF-EHEA in October 2011.

Table **Level correspondence established between the Estonian qualifications framework (EstQF) and the EQF**

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EstQF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| EQF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |

Important lessons and future plans

One of the key objectives of the EstQF is to improve comparability between formal school leaving certificates and occupational (professional) qualifications. EstQF has contributed to this objective in recent years by building up a more coherent and responsive lifelong learning system. The process has been intense. Recently, 'a remarkable convergence of the formal educational system and professional qualification system has taken place' ⁽¹¹⁾. EstQF regulates key quality criteria for qualifications to be included in the framework. They have to be defined in learning outcomes-based qualification standards (curriculum or professional standards), awarded by accredited institutions and be quality assured.

One of the key challenges is to consolidate the platform for cross-sectoral cooperation among stakeholders in implementation of the comprehensive NQF, including those from subsystems of education and training and the world of work.

Main sources of information

The Estonian Qualification Authority is designated as EQF national coordination point. <http://www.kutsekoda.ee> [accessed 6.12.2012].

Information on NQF development is available from <http://www.valew.eu/project-valew/project-partners/6-estonian-qualification-authority> [accessed 6.12.2012].

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Referencing of the Estonian qualifications and qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*, p. 10. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/estonia_en.pdf [accessed 5.12.2012].

⁽¹¹⁾ *Referencing of the Estonian qualifications and qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/estonia_en.pdf [accessed 5.12.2012].