

European Inventory on NQF 2012

THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction

The Dutch government gave its support to setting up a comprehensive qualifications framework for the Netherlands (NLQF) in September 2011. This decision also approved the proposal for referencing the NLQF to the EQF, a procedure which was completed in October 2011. The NLQF builds on and integrates the qualifications framework for higher education which was self-certified to the European higher education area in 2009.

The eight-level framework addresses two main categories of qualification. First are those qualifications regulated by the three Ministries of Education, Economic Affairs and Health/Welfare; then there are those outside public regulation and developed by stakeholders (mainly) in the labour market. This strong emphasis on the double character of the national qualifications system – where private and public providers interact and supplement each other – is an important defining feature of the NLQF. A NLQF coordination point is now working in line with these principles and the framework can be considered as having reached an early operational stage.

Main policy objectives

The adoption of the framework has been rapid. Initial preparations started as late as January 2009 and it moved into an early operational phase in 2012. The NLQF is a systematic arrangement of all existing qualifications in the Netherlands, resting on two pillars. The first is qualifications regulated by the public sector (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation, and the Ministry of Healthcare, Welfare and Sports). The second pillar is ‘other qualifications’, notably those awarded by the private sector outside the formal system and related to the labour market. These often have a strong ‘qualifying’ power in the labour market and their inclusion in the NLQF is expected to increase their visibility and further strengthen their value. The inclusion and classification of these qualifications will take place at the request of the bodies responsible for awarding the diplomas and certificates; this is generally also the body which provides the learning programme leading to the qualification. By bringing Ministry-regulated and other qualifications together in one framework, the NLQF will provide a substantially improved insight into the levels of qualifications offered and how these are related.

The NLQF addresses (Dutch Ministry of Education, 2012) ⁽¹⁾ a wide group of potential beneficiaries and aims at:

⁽¹⁾ *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework.*

- enabling people of all ages and in different situations to identify their level of education and training to find an appropriate education and training programme where they can use their abilities efficiently;
- enabling employers and individuals to understand the levels of existing national qualifications and international qualifications (through the EQF) and how they relate to each other;
- showing how the different qualifications contribute to improving workers' skills in the labour market.

The main objectives are:

- increase transparency within Dutch education;
- increase the understanding of qualifications within Europe;
- increase qualification level comparability;
- stimulate thinking in terms of learning outcomes as building blocks of qualifications;
- promote lifelong learning;
- increase the transparency of learning routes;
- increase the understanding of the level of qualifications by players in the labour market;
- aid communication between all stakeholders in education and employment.

In the Dutch EQF referencing report (op.cit. p.25) it is clearly stated that the NLQF has no role in reforming Dutch education and training, in regulating transfer and access, or in entitlements to qualifications and degrees. The framework is understood as a systematic arrangement of existing qualifications aiming at transparency and increased comparability. Whether the NQF will move from being a purely descriptive mechanism to an instrument supporting further development of Dutch education and training remains to be seen. Involving the private sector can be seen as moving beyond a purely descriptive role.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science coordinates the development and implementation of the NLQF. A project plan was developed during spring 2009 and resulted in the setting up of a steering group consisting of the three main ministries (see above). A small secretariat was set up in charge of daily running of the project and to coordinate the support of an expert group looking into the technical design of the framework (outlining level descriptors, testing their relevance, indicating how existing qualification levels can be referred to the new levels). A small expert group (The Leijnse committee) reviewed the technical proposal and made the recommendation on which further work has been based.

Different from many other countries, the project steering group consisted only of representatives of the three ministries; other stakeholders, for example social partners, were not directly involved. The expert group was four professors recruited for of their expertise in education and training matters, not for their ability to voice different interests and positions. While a consultation process has made it possible for all stakeholders to express their position on the developing framework, the original NLQF proposal was only weakly linked to stakeholders outside the main ministries involved in development. The future impact of the

NLQF will therefore require that it is seen as relevant to a wider group of stakeholders. The priority now given to the 'opening up' of the NLQF towards the private sector may – if it is successful – contribute significantly to this. The criteria and procedures detailed below illustrate the main principles now developed for the inclusion of 'other qualifications' into the NLQF.

The Ministry of Education has signalled that it will initiate revision of the existing legal texts underpinning Dutch education and training to make sure that the role of the NLQF is reflected. This revision will take time and may not be completed until 2015. This will not prevent the NQF carrying out its current work, but will ultimately strengthen the position of the framework.

The opening up of the NLQF: criteria and procedures

The NLQF – represented by the national coordination point – will from now on actively promote the possibility to have a qualification included in, and levelled to, the framework. This is being presented as an opportunity for providers to achieve better overall visibility, to strengthen comparability with other qualifications at national and European level, to be able to apply the learning outcomes approach and to strengthen links to the labour market.

If a provider such as a private company, wants to submit a qualification for inclusion, an accreditation (or in Dutch 'validation') has to take place. Issues like legal status, property rights, the continuity of the organisation and the existence of quality assurance arrangements will be checked. A list of approved quality assurance systems is included in the guidance material now developed. If the provider does not use such systems, an on-site visit will be organised.

When an organisation has been accredited (for five years) it can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling. The organisation will indicate the level it sees as most appropriate and this will provide the starting point for the assessment on which a final decision will be made. When asking for inclusion, the organisation will have to indicate the learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the NLQF level descriptors (see below), the workload (no qualifications of fewer than 400 hours nominal workload will be considered), the assessment approaches to be applied, and the link to relevant occupational profile.

While the NCP will be responsible for organising the process, committees of independent, external experts will assess the applications and give their advice to the Board of the NCP, which will eventually make the final decision on inclusion. The Board includes all the major stakeholders involved in the NLQF, including ministries and social partners.

Organisations will have to pay to use the system. Accreditation will vary between 1 000 and 7 500 Euro, depending on whether an approved quality assurance system is in place. Submitting one qualification for inclusion is set at 2 500 Euro.

The NLQF builds on the qualifications framework for higher education developed (from 2005) in the context of the Bologna process. This culminated in the national qualifications framework for higher education in the Netherlands, which was verified by an independent external committee of peers, February 2009. The NVAO, the accreditation organisation for the Netherlands and the Flemish community of Belgium, guarantees implementation through the accreditation process, which is obligatory across formally recognised higher education. In January 2010, brochures in English and Dutch were published for wider communication

purposes. The brochure and the national qualifications framework verification documents are available at the website of the NVAO ⁽²⁾.

Levels and descriptors

The NLQF operates with one entry level (lower than EQF 1) and eight qualifications levels. All levels are defined on the basis of learning outcomes. The diagram below shows how the Dutch qualifications are placed into the levels of the NLQF.

Table1 **Types of qualification placed into the levels of the Dutch qualifications framework (NLQF)**

NLQF	Adult education	Pre-vocational education	Upper secondary vocational education	Upper secondary general education (Havo and Vwo)	Higher education	'Other qualifications'
8						
7						
6						
5						
4+						
4						
3						
2						
1						
Entry level						

Source: Dutch Ministry of Education, 2012. *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*, p. 32.

The NLQF is seen as offering a new way of describing existing qualification levels. The following key-principles are emphasised:

- levels do not refer to, and are not defined by, education sectors;
- NLQF levels are not referenced to degrees or titles (meaning, for example, that a qualification at level 6 does not automatically belong to higher education and the achievement of this qualification does not give automatic entitlement to a Bachelor degree);
- all NLQF levels are open to all qualifications of all education sectors.

These principles signal that the NLQF goes further than several other 'new' European NQFs. Not only is it a comprehensive framework with a broad scope, it also stresses the principle that all levels (including 8) are open to all qualifications. As the table below illustrates, however, it is yet to be seen whether this principle is also reflected in practice.

The learning outcomes approach used to describe the nine levels is based on the following elements.

⁽²⁾ www.nvao.net [accessed 5.12.2012].

Table **Level descriptor in the Dutch national qualifications framework (NLQF)**

NLQF descriptors	
Context The context descriptions of the levels are used along with the described knowledge to determine the grade of difficulty of the skills.	
Knowledge Knowledge is the totality of facts, principles, theories and ways of working related to an occupation or a knowledge domain.	
Skills Cognitive abilities (logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical abilities (psychomotor skills in applying methods, materials, tools and instruments) applied within a given context	<u>Applying knowledge</u> Reproduce, analyse, integrate, evaluate, combine and apply knowledge in an occupation or a knowledge domain.
	<u>Problem-solving skills</u> Recognise or identify and solve problems.
	<u>Learning and development skills</u> Personal development, autonomously or under supervision
	<u>Information skills</u> Obtain, collect, process, combine, analyse and assess information.
	<u>Communication skills</u> Communicate based on conventions relevant to the context.
Responsibility and independence The proven ability to collaborate with others and to take responsibility for own work or study results or of others.	

The table demonstrates the influence of the EQF descriptors but differs in some important respects. As in several other countries, making context explicit has been seen as important. The subcategories introduced for skills can be seen as a way specifying the descriptors and making them more relevant to the Dutch context. They can also be seen as reflecting Dutch experiences in applying learning outcomes, for example in the VET (MBO) sector in recent years.

The learning outcomes, competence-oriented approach is broadly accepted and implemented in Dutch education and training. The Dutch referencing report to the EQF (2011) details a strong tradition of 'objectives-led' governance of education and training, an approach which has proved conducive for a competence-based approach. Vocational education and training is probably most advanced in competence orientation; following extensive reform, a new VET competence-based structure has been developed and implemented. The same tendencies can be observed in general and higher education, although somewhat less systematically. The introduction of the qualifications framework for higher education has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes, as has the involvement of single institutions in the so-called 'Tuning project'.

The strong position of the learning outcomes approach is reflected in the relatively widespread use of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands (EVC).

The NLQF will strengthen the role of validation and turn it into an integrated part of the qualifications system. The use of validation as an integrated part of the framework will help to connect with a wider range of learning activities and learning settings, for example in the private sector.

Links to other tools and policies

Compared to other European countries, the Netherlands has a well-established system for validating non-formal and informal learning. Specific characteristics of the Dutch system are:

- validation always takes place according to a national standard and should be concluded through the award of a certificate of experience and/or qualification stating what the candidate knows, is able to do or understand;
- public and private education and training institutions can offer APL;
- validation is oriented to the labour market (career development) and to education and training (to shorten the education programme);
- everybody can follow an APL procedure, practices are not limited to particular education and training) sectors or institutions.

The use of APL is financially supported by tax measures for employers and individuals. In 2009-10 the government took steps to strengthen the quality assurance dimension of validation: only those validation providers respecting the official 'quality code' will be able to offer validation deductible from taxes. The existing validation system very much rests on the learning outcomes and competence approach already adopted in Dutch education and training. The NLQF is expected to further strengthen this basis by providing a better overview over existing qualifications where validation is possible.

There is no link established between the NLQF and ECVET. This reflects that credit systems play a relatively limited role in the Netherlands and is mainly limited to the use of ECTS for higher education institutions. Current work on ECVET is defined as 'bottom up' and is exclusively linked to mobility projects.

Referencing to the EQF

The Netherlands referenced its NLQF to the EQF in October 2011.

The process drew attention to the referencing of the VWO (academically oriented secondary education) to level 5 of the EQF: most other European countries have decided to reference these school leaving certificates to level 4. This convergence reflects a broad agreement, supported by the Lisbon recognition convention, on the general levelling of this qualification, playing a key role in access to higher education. While countries agree that it is up to the Dutch government to decide on the levelling of this qualification, several countries have criticised the decision for not being sufficiently transparent and supported by documentation. Subsequently, VWO qualifications were linked to the NLQF/EQF level 4.

Table 2 **Level correspondence established between the Dutch qualifications framework (NLQF) and the EQF**

NLQF	Entry level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
EQF		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Important lessons and the way forward

The Dutch NQF is now in an early operational stage and has started its work, notably by opening up to 'other qualifications' in the private sector. Future success will largely depend on whether the framework will be seen as relevant to stakeholders outside the limited circle of formal, public education and training. Stakeholders close to the process see the need to develop a comprehensive communication strategy in the coming period to ensure that as many of them as possible are involved in the further development and implementation of the framework. The responsible ministry must ensure that the role of the NLQF is clearly defined in planned revision of the existing legal basis.

Main sources of information

NCP is hosted by the (umbrella) organisation CINOP/Knowledge Center RPL, <http://www.ncpnlqf.nl/> [accessed 12.3.2013].