

European Inventory on NQF 2012

PORTUGAL

Introduction

A comprehensive NQF (*Quadro Nacional de Qualificações – QNQ*) has been in place since October 2010 as a single reference for classifying all qualifications obtainable in Portuguese education and training. Established by the Decree Law No 396/2007 (Decreto-Lei No 396/2007), the framework (including eight levels and level descriptors of learning outcomes) was published in July 2009 (Portaria No 782/2009) ⁽¹⁾. Higher education qualifications have been included in the more detailed framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ-Portugal), which is part of the comprehensive NQF.

Main policy objectives

The NQF is seen as a tool for reforming Portuguese education and training. Initiated through the 2007 reform ⁽²⁾, the development of the national qualification system and NQF forms part of a broader education and training programme, notably the ‘new opportunities’ initiative and the ‘agenda for the reform of vocational training’. These reforms aim to raise the low qualifications level of Portuguese population (youngsters and adults) ⁽³⁾.

Three main goals are emphasised:

- to reinforce vocational/technical pathways as real options for young people (European Commission et al., 2010, Portugal, p.1) ⁽⁴⁾;
- to upgrade the education and qualification level of the adult population;
- to promote attainment of secondary education as a minimum level of qualification in Portugal ⁽⁵⁾.

For young people, the reform focuses on measures to prevent early school leaving and sets out to establish secondary level qualifications as a minimum requirement to be reached

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.catalogo.anqep.gov.pt/boDocumentos/getDocumentos/163>. [accessed 5.12.2012].

⁽²⁾ Decree Law No 396/2007.

⁽³⁾ Despite fact that there have been attempts to invest in qualifications over the last two decades, the number of early school leavers (aged 18-24) is still among the highest in EU countries (28.7% in 2010) and the total population having at least upper secondary education was 31.9% in 2010 (Eurostat data).

⁽⁴⁾ The National Qualifications Agency set the objective that 50% of those enrolled in upper secondary level should achieve a vocational qualification. See *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Portugal*. <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77477.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

⁽⁵⁾ Portugal has also raised the compulsory schooling age to 18 years.

by everyone ⁽⁶⁾. For adults, the reform offers those with low qualifications a new opportunity, through formal education and training and validation, to complement and expand their level of knowledge, skills and competences. The validation arrangements are particularly important, offering opportunities in both general and professional fields.

From the public policy perspective, the development of an integrated national qualification system and framework was regarded as necessary and a further contribution to such an ambitious programme as the 'new opportunity'. The comprehensive approach of the EQF was seen as an inspiration for initiating reforms and developing a national qualification system and a comprehensive national qualifications framework. This will integrate and coordinate qualifications obtained in different education and training subsystems (general education, professional education and training, etc.) within the scope of a single framework, allowing people to combine and transfer qualifications.

The reforms also aim to develop, integrate and further develop the system for valuing and recognising competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, in progress since 2001. However, there have been policy changes in the last year due to the austerity measures.

There is also new impetus to promoting the attractiveness of vocational training. All vocational education and training should serve to strengthen both the education levels and professional certification of the workforce.

In parallel, a framework for higher education was established and used as a tool to support reforms and developments ⁽⁷⁾. The main aims were to set up clear learning standards and identify progression routes through levels of learning (MCTES-Ministério da ciência, tecnologia e ensino superior, 2009) ⁽⁸⁾.

Apart from the NQF's national reform role, improving comparability and transparency of Portuguese qualifications and their understanding abroad by linking them to the EQF was also emphasised.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

Initial work on the NQF was carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, with the support of the Ministry of Education. In 2007, the Decree Law No 396/2007 was adopted as the legal basis for the development of the Portuguese qualifications system and framework. An agreement was signed between the government and the social partners on key elements: tools and regulatory systems to support development and the implementation of the national qualifications systems and framework. Three main steps were taken.

⁽⁶⁾ The National Agency for Qualifications has set an objective that 50% of the cohort at upper secondary level achieves a vocational qualification.

⁽⁷⁾ The current rate of tertiary attainment at 23% (2010) is still below the EU average (33.6%), but Portugal has made significant progress in recent years.

⁽⁸⁾ *FHEQ – Portugal: the framework for higher education qualifications in Portugal*. http://www.mctes.pt/archive/doc/FHEQ_in_Portugal.pdf [accessed 5.12.2012].

First, a new institutional model was developed to support setting up the national qualifications system and framework. A national Agency for Qualifications (*Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, I.P – ANQ*), under the responsibility of the, at the time, Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, was established in 2007 to coordinate the implementation of education and training policies for young people and to develop the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences. This has a key role to play in achieving the targets set out by new opportunities initiative and responsibility for managing the national network of the new opportunities centres. These centres provide access to recognition, validation and certification of competences, to vocational training, and to interrelationships between them in a lifelong learning perspective of each individual. The National Council for Vocational Training was set up as a tripartite body.

Second, a national qualifications catalogue was created in 2007 as a strategic management tool for non-higher national qualifications and a central reference tool for VET provision. For each qualification it defines an occupational profile, a training standard (that awards a double certification) and a recognition, validation and certification of competences standard; the catalogue is permanently updated by the National Agency for Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training, a process supported by 16 sector qualifications councils.

Third, the system for recognising non-formal and informal learning (RVCC) was further integrated into the NQF. The system for recognising non-formal and informal learning refers to the qualification standards in the national qualifications catalogue, both to 'school-based competences' (four, six, nine or 12 years of school) and 'professional competences'. The key competences standards for adult education and training for basic and secondary level are structured into key competence areas, covering the different contents of subjects at these specific educational levels.

The National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training is the main public body in charge of implementing the NQF. The agency's main responsibilities are for the education and double certified vocational training offer for adults and for young people, the national qualifications catalogue (with the help of the Sector Qualifications Councils) and the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences. The agency also acts as NCP and played a key role in referencing national qualifications to the EQF. Another important role is to articulate and communicate with the General Directorate for Higher Education regarding levels 5 to 8 of the NQF.

The NQF has reached an early operational stage. All VET is already organised based on the NQF: the databases are organised considering the structure of the NQF and the access to the financial support also takes the framework into consideration. Further, most national qualifications indicate the corresponding NQF qualification level, thus becoming increasingly visible to individuals. Education and training stakeholders are involved in the implementation of the NQF. There is still need to disseminate the information to a wide

spectrum of stakeholders, especially in the labour market, where the NQF is not yet known⁽⁹⁾.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

An eight-level reference structure was adopted to cover all the qualifications awarded in the Portuguese system. National qualifications levels and level descriptors are the same as in the EQF in terms of categories and principles.

The level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge and skills; in the third column, the term attitude is used. The term competence was already defined and used as an overarching concept within the national qualification system as 'recognised capacity to mobilise knowledge, skills and attitudes in contexts of work, professional development, education and personal development'⁽¹⁰⁾.

The learning outcome approach plays an important role in reforming Portuguese education and training. There is a diversity of approaches and concepts and the level of implementation varies across education subsystems. Fine-tuning learning outcomes in qualifications design with the NQF level descriptors is a challenging task and is work in progress (e.g. in upgrading not only the national qualifications catalogue but also for qualifications in general education).

In general education, the national curriculum for basic education (essential competences) that was in place until last year, was a national reference document for planning learning activities at both school and class levels. It included general and specific competences which learners are expected to develop in compulsory education. Currently the Ministry of Education has a set of 'curricular outcomes' for each specific subject in each year of basic education (considering the first, second and third cycle). In general upper secondary education there is a set of competences and general objectives, expressed in terms of knowledge, abilities/skills and attitudes/values, for each subject. The curricular outcomes for each specific subject of secondary education are being prepared.

In VET, reforms concentrate on the learning outcomes dimension of developing qualifications standards and curriculum development. The qualifications obtained in VET subsystems are organised by the standards included in the national qualifications catalogue.

Links to other instruments and policies

Several public policies and initiatives have been developed for validating non-formal and informal learning in Portugal. Since 2001, a comprehensive national RVCC system has been developed, which is nowadays integrated into the national qualification system and framework. It integrates two main processes:

⁽⁹⁾ NCP survey, September 2012.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Defined by Decree Law No 782/2009 (Portaria No 782/2009) on national qualification system.

- the education RVCC process, aiming to improve the education level of adults, who have no basic or secondary education certificates;
- the professional RVCC process, for adults who do not have vocational qualifications in their occupational areas (European Commission et al., 2010, Portugal, 2010) ⁽¹¹⁾.

Adults can acquire basic or secondary level education certificate and vocational qualification; such certificates have the same value as those awarded in formal education and training. RVCC processes are based on national standards for education and training (e.g. key competences in adult education and training reference framework) and integrated in the national catalogue of qualifications, which is used as a reference for vocational qualifications.

Access to higher education is ensured for those over the age of 23 and the introduction of technical specialisation courses (placed at level 5) also improved progression possibilities to continue studies in higher education.

There are two other domains in which work has begun:

- the development of an overarching model for quality assessment for the national qualifications system, considering that currently there are different approaches, methodologies and tools, depending on the type of VET provider;
- the development of a credit system for training based on the national qualifications catalogue standards.

Referencing to the EQF

Portugal referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to the QF-EHEA in June 2011.

Table **Level correspondence established between the Portuguese qualifications framework (QNQ) and the EQF**

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

Important lessons and future plans

The decision has been taken to adopt the EQF levels and level descriptors in the NQF and to set up a comprehensive NQF. This makes it possible to:

- integrate levels of education and a five-level structure for vocational training;
- formalise the double certification at levels 2, 4 and 5.

Important work has been done by writing the NQF users' guide (National Agency for Qualifications, 2011) ⁽¹²⁾ which provides specific criteria to place current, and guide inclusion

⁽¹¹⁾ *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Portugal.* <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77477.pdf> [accessed 26.11.2012].

of new, qualifications in the NQF. Further work on qualifications standards, based on explicit learning outcomes, will support the coherence and fine-tune the relationship between qualifications and qualifications levels. This work is still in progress. A clear institutional structure underpins the development.

There is a need to disseminate the outcomes of the referencing and self-certification process to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, especially improving acceptance and use of the NQF by the labour market. In this context the relationship between the tertiary framework and other parts of the NQF (levels 1 to 5) needs to be made explicit, especially for those level 5 programmes where different ministries are involved.

A strategy is being prepared, in articulation with the General Directorate for Higher Education, for including the explicit reference to the EQF level in the national certificates, diplomas and Europass documents.

Main sources of information

The National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training is the national coordination point for the EQF in Portugal. Information is available on the ANQ website. <http://www.en.anqep.gov.pt> [accessed 10.10.2012]

⁽¹²⁾ See *Understanding NQF: users guide support*, summarised in Appendix 3 of the referencing report.