

BELGIUM

European inventory on NQF 2016

Due to its federal structure, Belgium is facing the challenges of developing and implementing more than one national qualifications framework (NQF). The federal State comprises three regions (Flanders, the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region) and three Communities (the Flemish, the French and the German-speaking Community). Education is delegated to community level, giving each community wide responsibilities for financing and organising their respective education, training and qualifications systems.

While the Flemish and the French Communities have been working on national frameworks since 2005-06, the German-speaking Community started developing its own qualifications framework (*Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft* (QDG)) in 2011/12; the decree establishing the QDG was adopted by the Parliament in 2013. The Flemish and the French Communities have been following different framework development pathways, reflecting the substantial institutional and political differences in education and training between the two.

Despite adaptation to each specific context, the three frameworks have substantial similarities. Further, the fact that an amendment to the Belgian Federal Law on the general structure of the education system was adopted in 2012, stating that the EQF levels will be used as a common reference for the three Communities in Belgium, addresses the challenge of linkages between the frameworks, potentially facilitating for mobility for Belgian citizens within the country. At this stage, however, all three frameworks will be referenced separately to the EQF.

Belgium (the French Community)

Introduction and context

The French Community of Belgium has been working on a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*Cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie* (CFC)) linked to the EQF since 2006. Three distinct political authorities ⁽¹⁾ are involved in the work:

- (a) the French Community (the inhabitants of the French-speaking area of the Walloon Region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels);
- (b) the Walloon Region;
- (c) the COCOF (*Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*).

The current framework dates back to 2010 when the three governments of the French Community agreed on the principle of creating a qualifications framework with double entry, one for educational qualifications and one for vocational qualifications, placed into eight levels and consistent with the descriptors of the European qualifications framework. The proposed framework structure is close to that applied by the Flemish Community of Belgium. All major stakeholders agreed in mid-2011 on these main principles of the framework. The framework was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in December 2013. The CFC was formally adopted in February 2015 ⁽²⁾. The follow up to the Law, in particular the inclusion of qualifications to the framework, has been slower than originally anticipated and the CFC has yet to reach an operational status.

Policy objectives

The development of the CFC has been seen as an integral part of the evolution of the existing education and training system, for the purposes of improving overall transparency and collaboration, aiding mobility and supporting individual

⁽¹⁾ The responsibility for compulsory, adult and higher education lies with the French Community, whereas the Walloon Region and the COCOF are responsible for continuous vocational training in their respective areas.

⁽²⁾ <https://wallex.wallonie.be/index.php?doc=29286&rev=30796-20446&from=rss>

learning pathways for citizens. The 2015 Law on the CFC refers to the following key objectives:

- (a) facilitate learning continuity and progression;
- (b) build bridges between different parts of the education and training system;
- (c) strengthen relationship between initial and continuing education and training;
- (d) support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (e) increase transparency and facilitate comparison across regional and national borders.

While the CFC is seen as an instrument for strengthening the use of learning outcomes and for referencing to the EQF, the framework will not have any regulatory role and it is not seen as an instrument for reform of existing institutions and structures. For the moment, only qualifications delivered by public providers will be included.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

An eight-level structure has been designed, using two blocks of terms: knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility. The descriptors developed by the Flemish qualifications framework have been used as a basis but adjusted according to the conditions of the region.

A competence-based approach is well established in compulsory education and training. Learning outcomes are described in terms of *socles de compétences* and *compétences terminales*. For adult education (including higher education short cycles, bachelor and master degrees) the term used is *capacités terminales*.

In vocational education and training, work is continuing to define and describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, to meet the need for shared reference systems for VET. Since 2010, regional providers of continuous vocational education and training (CVET) have developed a common certification procedure (*reconnaissance des acquis de formation* (RECAF)) based on common qualifications standards and common assessment standards, with a competence-based approach. The French service for trades and qualifications (*Service francophone des métiers et qualifications* (SFMQ)) is playing an important role for learning outcomes, both for vocational compulsory education (initial vocational education and training (IVET)) and for CVET (education for adults and public providers of vocational training in Wallonia and Brussels). The descriptions of qualifications are based on the job profiles (professional standards) defined by the social partners. Common training profiles are then

defined by providers. These profiles are declined in units of learning outcomes compatible with the European credit system for VET (ECVET) specifications.

In higher education, a guide has been produced to help higher education institutions define their learning outcomes to fit into common competence reference systems. The autonomy of universities means that the decision to apply learning outcomes has to be made by the institution itself, resulting in varying approaches. There is little information on the extent of use of learning outcomes, apart from in the university colleges. Here, the new competences reference systems are gradually being implemented (Cedefop, 2016).

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The three executive bodies of French-speaking Belgium (the French Community, the Walloon Region and COCOF) initiated the CFC development and established an expert group to do the preparatory work. This group includes representatives from all levels of education and regional bodies for vocational training. In future, the national coordination point (NCP) responsibilities will lie with a steering and positioning authority which is yet to be established.

The NQF initiative can be divided into two distinct phases; before and after 2010. While the period before 2010 was characterised by high-quality technical work, lack of clarity over the role of higher education in the comprehensive framework created tensions and caused delays. The process was revitalised after 2010 and a new steering group was set up, including stakeholders from general education (at all levels and of all types, including universities) and vocational/professional education and training (including social partners).

The division of the framework into two main strands – educational and professional qualifications – has implications for stakeholder involvement. The *Service francophone des métiers et qualifications* (SFMQ) will play a key role in defining and positioning professional qualifications at levels 1 to 4. The SFMQ is well placed to play this role as its overall task is to develop occupational profiles based on the inputs of the social partners and in collaboration with employment services. Its role is also to develop training profiles for these occupational profiles, in liaison with education and training providers. The Academy of Research and Higher education (ARES) will be responsible for defining and positioning educational qualifications at levels 6 to 8. ARES and SFMQ will share responsibility for qualifications at level 5, reflecting the extensive ‘mix’ of professional and educational qualifications at this level.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽³⁾

In French-speaking Belgium, the system for validating non-formal and informal learning has undergone important developments since the early 2000s. It is the result of initiatives supported nationally and is framed by important pieces of legislation. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) was first developed in adult education (*Enseignement de promotion sociale* (EPS)) in 1991, followed in 2003 by the CVET sector, with a focus on individuals with no formal qualifications.

There are now two types of VNFIL in Belgium: the validation of competences (*validation des compétences* (VDC)) in the continuous vocational education and training (CVET) sector, leading to the award of a recognised certificate; and the validation of prior experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE)) in adult education and higher education, leading to the validation of learning units or exemptions from certain parts of a study pathway. Recent policy strategies confirm that validating non-formal and informal learning is now a key element of employment and education policies. With a new regulatory framework in place since 2014 (Decree on the organisation of higher education), VAE in higher education now has a stronger institutional basis.

Challenges still need to be addressed, particularly improving the value of the skills certificate on the labour market and widening the profile of VAE users, but the scheme today is generally considered effective and robust.

NQF implementation

Introducing the distinction between educational and professional qualifications was instrumental in bringing the NQF process forward. This distinction made it possible to open up for professional qualifications at higher levels without questioning the autonomy of universities and their responsibility in relation to bachelor, master and doctorate awards. Using one set of level descriptors for all levels and both types of qualifications has been accepted by the different stakeholders and will, in the longer term, make it possible to look more carefully into how these two strands can interact with each other.

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

While the legal adoption of the CFC in 2015 was important, delays in appointing an executive staff has slowed down overall progress, in particular as regards inclusion of qualifications in the framework. This means that the CFC has yet to reach operational status.

Referencing to the EQF

A referencing report (Malarme, 2013) was presented to the EQF advisory group in December 2013. The report encompasses a thorough description of the education and training system in the French Community, an account of the context and development of the CFC, and a section on how the CFC and adjoining development processes and responsibilities meet the 10 referencing criteria. There is no overview of where specific qualifications are to be placed in the CFC, but plans for the positioning and implementation process are described.

Level correspondence between the CFC and the EQF:

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

Important lessons and future plans

While formal adoption is important, moving towards operational status requires that practical follow up and implementation takes place as required.

The development of the CFC also demonstrates the importance of finding a workable link between higher education and the other forms of education and training. Distinguishing between educational and professional qualifications at all levels has been instrumental in making progress. Whether this structure can be used to open up for future developments of professional qualifications at higher levels and for establishing stronger links between educational and professional sectors remains to be seen.

Further sources of information

Service francophone des métiers et des qualifications (French-speaking service for jobs and qualifications); acts as the EQF national coordination point:

<http://www.sfmq.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1435> [accessed 4.3.2015].

Wallex: le Droit en Wallonie:

<https://wallex.wallonie.be/index.php?doc=29286&rev=30796-20446&from=rss>
 [accessed 14.12.2016]

List of abbreviations

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| ARES | <i>Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur</i> [Academy of Research and Higher Education] |
| CFC | <i>Cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie</i> [French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning] |
| COCOF | <i>Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale</i> [French Community commission in the Brussels-capital Region] |
| CVET | continuous vocational education and training |
| ECVET | European credit system for vocational education and training |
| EEA | European economic area |
| EQF | European qualifications framework |
| NCP | national coordination point |
| NQF | national qualifications framework |
| QDG | <i>Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft</i> [qualifications framework German-speaking Community] |
| RECAF | <i>Reconnaissance des acquis de formation</i> [recognition of prior learning] |
| SFMQ | <i>Service francophone des métiers et qualifications</i> [French service for trades and qualifications] |
| VAE | <i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> [valorisation of prior experience] |
| VDC | <i>validation des compétences</i> [valorisation of competences] |
| VET | vocational education and training |

References

- Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study*. Luxembourg: Publications Office.
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>
- European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Belgium (BE-fr)*.
- Malarme (ed.) (2013). *Report on referencing the French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning* [unpublished].