



EUROPEAN INVENTORY OF NQFs 2022

BELGIUM

Flemish-speaking Community



European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022 – Belgium, Flemish-speaking Community

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	National context	1
2.1.	Policy context	1
2.2.	NQF legal basis.....	2
3.	NQF objectives and functions.....	2
4.	Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications	3
4.1.	NQF structure and level descriptors.....	3
4.2.	NQF scope and coverage	3
4.3.	Use of learning outcomes	5
4.4.	Quality assurance arrangements	7
5.	Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement.....	7
6.	Recognition and validation of prior learning.....	8
6.1.	Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways	8
7.	NQF implementation and impact	9
7.1.	Stage of implementation	9
7.2.	Indicating EQF/NQF levels.....	9
7.3.	NQF dissemination.....	9
7.4.	Qualifications databases and registers	9
7.5.	Awareness and use of the NQF	10
7.6.	Monitoring and evaluating the NQF	10
7.7.	Impact of the NQF	10
8.	Referencing to the EQF	11
9.	Reflections and plans	11
	Acronyms	11
	References.....	12
	Webpages and databases	12

1. Introduction

This report is part of the European inventory of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Since 2009, Cedefop has been carrying out a systematic mapping and analysis of NQF developments in countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process. These reviews, done in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, have directly supported the development of operational and sustainable NQFs. The report offers a detailed description of the structure and scope of the NQF of the Flemish Community in Belgium, and its objectives, functions and institutional arrangements, along with data on the framework's implementation and its impact on broader policy areas.

Due to its federal structure, Belgium developed three NQFs, one for each of the three language communities: Flemish, French and German. Despite adaptation to the needs of each community, the three frameworks share important common features, supporting interoperability. An amendment to Belgian federal law on the general structure of the education system was adopted in 2012, stating that the EQF will be used as a common reference for all three communities. This addresses the challenge of linking the three frameworks and potentially eases the mobility of Belgian citizens within the country.

In 2009, the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium introduced the the Flemish qualifications framework, FQF (*Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur, VKS*). It is a comprehensive (including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training), learning-outcome-based framework with eight levels, using two main categories of level descriptors: knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility. The FQF was referenced to the EQF in June 2011, and an updated report was submitted in March 2014. A qualifications framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process, now integrated into the FQF, was put in place in 2008, and was self-certified to the qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in 2009.

2. National context

2.1. Policy context

In Belgium in 2020, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product was 6.6 %, which was 1.6 percentage points higher than the EU average. The country performs above average on several key education and training indicators. In 2020, participation in early childhood education was 98.5 %, while in 2021 the share of early leavers from education and training was 6.7 %. In

2020, the share of upper secondary students in vocational education and training (VET) was 55.7 %, while tertiary educational attainment (age 25–34) was 50.9 % in 2021. Only participation in adult learning was slightly lower than the EU average (10.2 % and 10.8 % respectively) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

2.2. NQF legal basis

The FQF was introduced with the adoption of the [decree on the qualification structure](#) in 2009, and is firmly legally embedded. In the reform of secondary education launched in 2019 ⁽¹⁾, and the qualification reform at level 5, the FQF is seen as an instrument reshaping the structure and content of secondary and higher VET. In 2019, the implementation of the FQF was supported by the adoption of the [decrees on communal quality assurance framework for professional qualifications at all levels](#) and the [decree on recognition of acquired competences](#). With the approval of these regulations, the FQF has acquired a broader scope. They provide a quality framework, quality-assuring courses or recognition and validation of prior learning that can lead to a professional qualification at any level of the FQF ⁽²⁾. This ensures that all people following such courses or procedures for the recognition of prior learning, leading to the same professional qualifications and titles, have obtained the same set of skills after completion of the course or procedure.

3. NQF objectives and functions

The qualifications system and framework aim to make qualifications and associated competences more transparent, to ease communication among stakeholders in education, training and the labour market, and to promote the comparability of qualifications nationally and at the European level.

The FQF functions as a reference for quality assurance, developing and renewing courses, and developing and aligning procedures for recognising acquired competences (Cedefop, 2020). It contributes to further promoting the learning-outcomes approach as a valuable tool in lifelong learning policy and raising awareness regarding its potential benefits. For instance, stakeholders

⁽¹⁾ The reform of secondary education is expected to be completed in 2026 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

⁽²⁾ The scope of the decree on the communal quality assurance framework covers all the vocational training programmes offered outside formal education, relying on the professional qualifications standard (Cedefop and Bruxelles Formation, 2019). In addition to education providers, private or public organisations can now also offer training or recognition of competences (EVC programmes) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

should be informed on how to draft the learning outcomes of education courses to address the competence needs of the labour market, ease the comparison of qualifications at the national and international levels and design training courses in such a way that smaller units of competences can be certified, and can thus be a stepping stone to obtain a full qualification (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The FQF provides a clear commitment to focus on the learning-outcomes approach regarding both policy level and the design of programmes and qualifications. It is based on an eight-level structure described by the categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility. Compared to the EQF, FQF descriptors are more detailed, particularly at lower levels. One main feature of the Flemish framework is the use of ‘context’ as an explicit element of the descriptors. The context in which an individual can function is seen as an important part of any qualification. The term ‘competence’ also 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, except in higher education.

The FQF levels determine the links between professional and educational qualifications. The inclusion of a professional qualification within an educational one is based on their FQF levels. For instance, an FQF level-4 professional qualification can only be included in an educational qualification at FQF level 3 or 4, ensuring consistency in their design (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

4.2. NQF scope and coverage

The FQF is a comprehensive framework incorporating all types of qualifications from all parts of education (from primary education to doctoral degrees), including professional qualifications that can be awarded both inside and outside formal education, along with the validation of prior learning. The FQF links educational and professional qualifications. By April 2023, 571 professional qualifications (*Beroepskwalificatie*) and 75 partial professional qualifications (at levels 2 to 7), along with 662 educational qualifications (*Onderwijskwalificatie*)⁽³⁾, had been

⁽³⁾ A total of 134 secondary education qualifications, 30 graduate degree qualifications and 598 bachelor's/master's degree qualifications.

included in the FQF and published in the Flemish qualifications database ⁽⁴⁾. A partial qualification is related to microcredentials ⁽⁵⁾.

An explicit distinction is made between educational and professional qualifications; in principle all eight levels are open to both. A professional qualification is based on a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession ⁽⁶⁾. Educational qualifications provide a set of competences that enable individuals to actively participate in society, continue education and/or exercise professional activities. They can only be acquired through education programmes offered by education institutions recognised by the Flemish authorities. Depending on the level and form of education, such qualifications may consist of one or more professional qualifications, final objectives and/or specific final objectives (Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training, 2012).

Table 1. **Flemish qualifications framework (FQF)**

NQF level	Educational qualification	Professional qualification	EQF level
8	Doctoral degree (<i>Universiteit – Doctor</i>)		8
7	Academic master's degree (<i>Universiteit – Master</i>) Advanced master's programmes (<i>master na master – manama</i>)	Examples: librarian / information manager (<i>Bibliothecaris/Informatiemanager</i>) physiotherapist (<i>Kinesitherapeut</i>) archivist / information manager (<i>Archivaris/informatiebeheerder</i>)	7
6	Academic bachelor's degree (<i>Universiteit – Bachelor</i>) Professional bachelor's degree (<i>Hogeschool – Bachelor</i>) Advanced bachelor's programme (<i>bachelor na bachelor – banaba</i>)	Examples: dietitian (<i>Diëtist</i>) dental technologist (<i>Dentaaltechnoloog</i>) textile designer (<i>Textielontwerper</i>)	6
5	Graduate degree (short cycle) (<i>Graduaat</i>)	Examples: archive expert (<i>Archiefdeskundige</i>) decorative painting coordinator-advisor (<i>Coördinator – adviseur decoratieve schilderwerken</i>) police inspector (<i>Inspecteur Politie</i>)	5

⁽⁴⁾ Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

⁽⁵⁾ Source: internal communication with AHOVOKS.

⁽⁶⁾ Professional qualifications often build on each other in terms of content. For example, a learner can attend training as a baker, followed by training as an assistant baker, obtaining exemptions for the common competences (training can be offered by different providers). Learners holding a partial qualification can obtain a full professional qualification following additional training or recognition of experience. Furthermore, professional qualifications should reflect the competences of the relevant profile. Social partners provide input into developing them, and also approve them.

NQF level	Educational qualification	Professional qualification	EQF level
4	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (<i>Algemeen Secundair Onderwijs</i>) Upper secondary technical education school leaving certificate (<i>Technisch Secundair Onderwijs</i>) Upper secondary artistic education leaving certificate (<i>Kunstsecundair Onderwijs</i>) Certificate of a specialisation year as a preparation for higher education	Examples: bartender (<i>Barman</i>) electromechanic (<i>Elektromecanicien</i>) commercial assistant (<i>Commercieel assistent</i>) pastry chef (<i>Banketbakker</i>)	4
3	Upper secondary vocational education school leaving certificate (<i>Beroepssecundair Onderwijs – BSO</i>)	Examples: construction welder (<i>Constructielasser</i>) florist's assistant (<i>Assistent florist</i>) driver in the fuel service (<i>Chauffeur in de brandstoffenhandel</i>)	3
2	Adult basic education Lower secondary education – first stage of secondary education Pre-vocational education	Examples: animal production assistant (<i>Assistent dierlijke productie</i>) room-service employee (<i>Medewerker kamerdienst</i>) bakery and pastry-shop employee (<i>Medewerker brood- en banketbakkerij</i>)	2
1	Certificate of elementary education (6 years)		1

Sources: AHOVOKS, 2020 (email communication); [Flemish qualification database](#).

4.3. Use of learning outcomes

Practical implementation of the principles of learning outcomes (competences) has progressed. They are present in general education, for example through the setting of learning objectives (attainment targets in national core curricula). An important change occurred in relation to educational qualifications at FQF levels 1 to 4. Starting from 2018, following the adoption of a decree on altering the secondary education structure and the renewal of learning outcomes for compulsory education ⁽⁷⁾, new attainment targets will gradually be developed by 2025. In 2020, the content and profile of such educational qualifications were approved and will be gradually implemented in the context of the modernisation of secondary education ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ Compulsory education lasts for a maximum of 12 school years, up to the age of 18 or as soon as a pupil obtains the diploma of secondary education.

⁽⁸⁾ More information in Cedefop and ReferNet (2023).

The VET sector is probably the most advanced. Implementation has been accelerated by the 2019 secondary education reform. Special attention is paid to the interplay between professional qualifications and final attainment levels, so that learners from upper secondary vocational education and upper secondary technical education are well prepared for the labour market, with a good balance between basic skills and general knowledge, along with professional competences. In dual learning, most of the existing courses in the second and third grades have already been updated.

At post-secondary level, 1-year specialisation programmes are offered as follow-up technical programmes. Developments have also occurred at EQF level 5, in graduate courses leading to short-cycle graduate degrees, which have been updated to be based on at least one professional qualification. The professional qualifications are translated into domain-specific learning outcomes for each educational qualification⁽⁹⁾. By 2024, all graduate degree programmes should be based on a professional qualification (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). In this way, labour market needs are reflected in VET programmes, including higher VET at EQF level 5⁽¹⁰⁾.

Adult education centres are modularising their training offer and bringing it in line with the content of professional qualifications. The Flemish Public Employment and Vocational Training Service (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding - VDAB*) aims to speed up jobseekers' introduction to the labour market (through short training courses, which are not necessarily based on a full professional qualification). The communal quality assurance framework for professional qualifications enables the VDAB and other public or private providers to offer recognised training programmes leading to FQF-levelled full professional qualifications and partial qualifications⁽¹¹⁾.

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. A clear strengthening of the learning-outcomes principle has taken place in Flanders. Learning outcomes that have been acquired previously can (after successful assessment or validation) lead to the acquisition of corresponding credits in higher education⁽¹²⁾. At levels 6–8, higher education institutions jointly describe the subject-specific learning outcomes for higher education courses⁽¹³⁾. The validated descriptions of the subject-specific

⁽⁹⁾ There are 29 level-5 educational qualifications based on 60 level-5 professional qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

⁽¹⁰⁾ More information in the '[Policy note 2019–2024 – Work and social economy](#)'.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Source*: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

⁽¹²⁾ Credits are referred to in Flanders as 'study points', while students who successfully complete a course or modules are awarded a credit certificate (De Rick, 2019).

⁽¹³⁾ [Decree](#) on the qualification structure.

learning outcomes are automatically recognised as educational qualifications by the Flemish government and published in the Flemish qualifications database (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

4.4. Quality assurance arrangements

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie - NVAO*) ensures the quality of higher education in Netherlands and Flanders ⁽¹⁴⁾ by assessing and accrediting programmes, and by contributing to improving quality. The Education Inspectorate monitors adult education and dual and non-dual training programmes in secondary education and adjusts their quality framework accordingly. For the training of private partners recognised by the Department of Work, a quality assessment body (Team Supervisors Entities Work) was set up to check the quality requirements of courses leading to professional qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The day-to-day running of the FQF has been delegated to the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Allowances (*Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen, AHOVOKS*). The agency was appointed as the EQF national coordination point and is responsible for coordinating the FQF implementation process (e.g. indicating NQF levels on diplomas), involving all stakeholders through expert committees. It is also responsible for developing educational and professional qualifications and overseeing the quality assurance of the development of professional qualifications ⁽¹⁵⁾. The AHOVOKS Department of Qualifications and Curriculum acts as the FQF's secretariat. As the agency is part of the education ministry, the FQF's implementation relies on public funds (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The process of FQF implementation has involved a broad range of stakeholders, including the labour ministry and the Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media, coordinated by the education ministry. Regarding education and training, the participation of relevant sectors (general education; initial, continuing and higher vocational education; and training and higher education) has been important. The education and labour ministries strove for closer alignment between

⁽¹⁴⁾ The [European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education](#).

⁽¹⁵⁾ AHOVOKS has made available a self-assessment instrument to help organisations assess the quality of their validation procedures.

education and training and the labour market. To formalise this collaboration, an overarching management committee dealing with education, training and work was created to prepare and monitor policy decisions. The committee meets several times a year with all of the leading officials of the education and labour ministries, while regular meetings are also organised with sectoral representatives.

Flemish professional qualifications are developed within a tripartite system, involving sectoral representatives of employers and employees, the VDAB and independent experts. Social partners, in the context of the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (*Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen – SERV*) have a decisive role. While time-consuming and challenging, the inclusion of professional qualifications in the FQF can be deemed a success, as it demonstrates that stakeholders are fully involved in and responsible for implementing the framework ⁽¹⁶⁾.

6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

6.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is well established on the public policy agenda ⁽¹⁷⁾. In Flanders, the term *erkennen van verworven competenties (EVC)* (recognition of acquired competences) is used to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽¹⁸⁾. Validation is used to obtain a certificate of professional qualification and gain admission to an education and training programme, and also to request exemptions from (parts of) the study programme.

The main changes have been the increased congruence between different validation providers (both inside and outside education), new developments in quality assurance and the adoption of a single integrated quality assurance framework linking validation processes to the FQF. The [decrees on a communal quality assurance framework for professional qualifications at all levels](#) and on the [recognition of acquired competences](#) have strengthened the coherence of quality assurance systems. They serve as the legal basis for a system of external quality assurance for all courses and/or the validation and recognition of non-formal and

⁽¹⁶⁾ The VDAB guidance and counselling practitioners and the stakeholders that develop professional qualifications use the [Competent](#) database as a reference framework.

⁽¹⁷⁾ This section draws mainly on input from De Rick (2019).

⁽¹⁸⁾ Validation is a matter of policy in various education sectors, and the arrangements in these sectors differ as each ministry department regulates validation within its remit.

informal learning resulting in a professional qualification. EVC standards have already been developed for 28 professional qualifications ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The VDAB and other public or private providers that offer recognised training programmes leading to FQF-levelled partial or full professional qualifications, which meet the standards set by the communal quality assurance framework, can also provide recognition of prior learning, leading to such qualifications. Since 2020, these procedures have become operational through the accreditation of several training organisations.

7. NQF implementation and impact

7.1. Stage of implementation

The FQF is operational. The road from adoption to implementation and operational status has proved complex. However, a series of implementation decrees have been adopted, covering professional and educational qualifications and validation of prior learning, which have promoted the implementation of the FQF and have led to detailed procedures for levelling qualifications (see Section 2.2) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

7.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

FQF and EQF levels are indicated on all qualifications included in the framework, and on the Europass VET certificate and higher education diploma supplements. The only exception is the certificate of elementary education at FQF level 1 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

7.3. NQF dissemination

So far, the FQF's communication efforts have primarily been oriented towards partners at the macro and meso levels (representatives of other policy domains, social partners, sectoral organisations and education institutions). Information about the FQF and about related seminars and meetings with sectoral organisations is disseminated via the [FQF website](#); links to relevant [documentation](#) and [FQF brochures](#) are also available. However, the website should be revised to become more user-friendly, flexible and interconnected.

7.4. Qualifications databases and registers

A [qualification database](#) has been set up to support the FQF. It includes all FQF educational and professional qualifications, mainly targeting education and training

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Source:* Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

providers. It provides information in Dutch on the field of study, the FQF level, the learning outcomes, the awarding body, the relationship to occupations or occupational fields and the expiry date, along with a link to the qualification. The database is connected to the Europass platform. Another database that will be able to link qualifications with learning opportunities, aiming to make learning pathways transparent for citizens and to assist guidance and career development, is under development (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Since 2021, the [LED \(Leer- en ervaringsbewijzen\) database](#) has also been available. It offers data on all types of qualification certificates, as certificates issued by Flemish institutions are instantly included in the database. Individuals can access their qualification certificates there (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

7.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

Education and training providers, along with labour market representatives, involved in developing professional qualifications are aware of the FQF. Interprofessional social partners are involved in the procedure for the recognition of professional qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

7.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

In 2022, the evaluation of professional qualifications from a user perspective was developed, focusing on the use and value of such qualifications and of the programmes leading to them. Opinions differ depending on the study field and the end users of each qualification. However, there is overall agreement that professional qualifications ensure a better connection to the labour market, are transparent and create the right expectations among the actors involved. However, tensions arose while trying to describe learning outcomes in a clear and concrete way and to allow sufficient space and (pedagogical) freedom for institutions to address their specific needs (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

7.7. Impact of the NQF

The FQF has contributed to strengthening the links between educational and professional qualifications and fostering the quality assurance of professional qualifications. The framework also plays a role in the continuous review and renewal of qualifications. Furthermore, the single integrated quality assurance framework has linked the validation of prior learning to the FQF.

8. Referencing to the EQF

The FQF was referenced to the EQF in June 2011, and an updated report was submitted in March 2014. Developments such as the decrees on a quality assurance framework for professional qualifications and on an integrated policy for the recognition of acquired competences call for an updated referencing report, which is expected in 2023. A qualifications framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process was put in place in 2008 and self-certified to the QF-EHEA in 2009.

9. Reflections and plans

Stakeholders consider the implementation of the FQF for professional qualifications to be successful (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The same qualification can be obtained through various pathways (e.g. adult learning, secondary education, dual learning and recognition of prior learning), promoting permeability (horizontal and vertical) in education and training, parity of esteem between education sectors and lifelong learning. Transparency between educational and professional qualifications has been enhanced. The FQF is seen as an instrument reshaping the structure and content of secondary and higher VET. The framework also contributes to better coordination between education, training and the labour market. With the approval of the regulations on the communal quality framework and on the recognition of acquired competences, the FQF has found a broader scope, building trust in professional qualifications and acquired competences, independent of the way they were obtained.

Despite the improvements brought about by the development and introduction of the FQF, there are still issues to be addressed. Plans include supporting teachers, trainers and guidance/counselling staff in their use of the framework and communicating the framework and the value of qualifications to the individual.

Acronyms

AHOVOKS	Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen (Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants)
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
VDAB	Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (Flemish Public Employment and Vocational Training Service)

VET	vocational education and training
VKS	Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur (Flemish qualifications framework)

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