

BELGIUM (Flemish Community)

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

On 30 April 2009 the Flemish Parliament and Government in Belgium adopted the Act on the qualification structure ⁽¹⁾ (*kwalificatiestructuur*) introducing a comprehensive qualifications framework. The framework, based on an eight-level structure described by the two main categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility, was formally referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in June 2011.

The road from formal adoption to implementation proved more time-consuming than originally predicted. Delays were partly caused by the need for further legal instruments (implementation decrees on professional and educational qualifications), and partly by negotiations with the social partners on how to link and level professional qualifications to the framework. This clarification was largely completed by 2013-14, allowing implementation to speed up.

The Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) is now – December 2016 – operational, covering a total of 240 professional (*Beroeps*) and 220 educational qualifications ⁽²⁾. The vocational qualifications have been levelled individually (as opposed to a placement ‘block-wise’) in a process involving the main social partners.

Policy objectives

The 2009 Act on the qualifications structure defines the Flemish qualification system as ‘... a systematic classification of recognised qualifications based on a generally adopted qualifications framework (FQF)’. The qualification structure

⁽¹⁾ Act on the qualification structure (*Decreet betreffende de kwalificatiestructuur*):
<http://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14111>
[accessed December 2016].

⁽²⁾ The qualification database (*Kwalificatiedatabank*):
https://app.akov.be/pls/pakov/f?p=VLAAMSE_KWALIFICATIESTRUCTUUR:KWALIFICATIEDATABANK [accessed December 2016].

(including the qualifications framework) aims at making qualifications and their mutual relationships transparent, so that stakeholders in education (students, pupils and providers) and in the labour market (social partners) ‘/.../ can communicate unambiguously about qualifications and the associated competences’ (2009 Act on the qualifications structure, Chapter I, Article 3).

The act underlines that the qualification structure (including the qualifications framework) should act as a reference:

- (a) for quality assurance, for developing and renewing courses;
- (b) for developing and aligning procedures for recognising acquired competences;
- (c) for comparison (nationally and at European level) of qualifications.

This indicates that the FQF is seen as something more than a pure description of existing qualifications: it plays a role in the continuous review and renewal of qualifications.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The term ‘competence’ 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.

The descriptors

The FQF is based on an eight-level structure described by the categories of knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility. Compared to the EQF, FQF descriptors are more detailed, particularly for lower levels. A main difference is that the FQF does not use ‘competence’ as a separate descriptor category; it considers it as an overarching term and uses it interchangeably with learning outcomes. A main feature of the Flemish framework is the use of ‘context’ as an explicit element of the descriptors. The context in which an individual is able to function is seen as an important part of any qualification. This can be seen as a criticism of EQF descriptors which contain contextual elements but fail to treat them explicitly.

The descriptors are used to describe two main categories of qualifications; professional and educational. A professional qualification is based on a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession and can be achieved both inside and outside education. An educational qualification is based on a set of competences an individual needs to participate in society, to start further education and/or to exercise professional activities. An educational qualification can only be acquired through education and in institutions recognised by the

Flemish authorities. The distinction between professional and educational qualifications is applied for all eight levels of the framework; this offers the potential for high level qualifications in parallel to traditional academic institutions.

Learning outcomes and competences

Practical implementation of the principles of learning outcomes/competences has progressed in recent years. The VET sector is probably the most experienced in this field. A competence-based approach is well integrated, referring to professional requirements in the labour market. The use of competences in initial VET in recent years has been inspired by Dutch developments, particularly the upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*, (MBO)) reform. Discussions between the Social and Economic Committee (SSERV) and the government in 2010 and 2011 on implementing the framework can be seen as part of this process; how can existing occupational competence standards be translated into learning-outcomes-based professional qualifications and then attributed a level in the FQF? Learning outcomes are also present in general education, for example by the setting of learning objectives in national core curricula. 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. While reflecting a diverse situation, a clear shift to learning outcomes has taken place in recent years in Flanders.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Flemish national qualifications framework process has involved a broad range of stakeholders at all stages, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training. Other ministries – Ministry of Labour and Social Economy and Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media – have also been involved. From the education and training side, participation by relevant sectors (general education, initial vocational education, continuing vocational education and training, higher education, including short cycle higher education) has been important. The link and overlap ⁽³⁾ between professional and higher or general educational

⁽³⁾ This overlap results from the fact that professional qualifications are integrated in educational qualifications, outside higher education at levels 6 to 8. It is being

qualifications has been a challenge and the active involvement of stakeholders representing the different levels and types of qualifications has been important. The day-to-day running of the QF has been delegated to the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education Qualifications and Grants (AHOVOKS, *Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen*)⁽⁴⁾.

A qualifications framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process was developed and put in place (2008). The relationship between the two framework initiatives was discussed throughout the development process and the 2009 act takes this into account in its terminology, framework descriptors and procedures.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways⁽⁵⁾

In Flanders, the term EVC (*erkennen van competenties*: recognition of competences) is used to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Each ministry department regulates validation within its own sector: the Departments for Work and Social Economy, Education and Training and Culture, Youth, Media and Sports. In all these, the development of validation systems and procedures contributes to policy aims such as improving the qualification levels of the population, reducing unemployment levels and aiding lifelong learning. Validation policy is aimed at the general population, but specific measures and initiatives are targeted at the low-skilled, the unemployed, migrants and refugees. Validation practices in the different sectors have not changed substantially in the last few years. Validation can be used to get admission to an education and training programme, to request exemptions from (parts of) the study programme

acknowledged that further alignment between professional and educational qualifications is needed.

- (⁴) AHOVOKS took over this role from the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV, *Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming*), which has been discontinued due to reorganisation of the Flemish administration.
- (⁵) 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., 2016).

and to obtain a work experience certificate. Validation is a matter of policy in different sectors and the arrangements in these sectors differ.

However, driven by the need to address fragmentation of validation practices and terminology, current developments at policy level aim at an integrated approach to validation. The main change is increased cooperation between different validation providers (inside as well as outside education) and the willingness to create a single framework linking the validation processes to the FQF. The 2009 act stresses that it should be possible to obtain qualifications through formal, informal and non-formal learning and that the framework should support this. The agreement to use the FQF as a reference for validation procedures is expected to raise the visibility and credibility of validation. In July 2015, the concept for an integrated framework for validation in Flanders was approved by the Flemish government and a government task force has been set up to develop the integrated policy framework and to draft a decree on validation.

All information on validation in Flanders is available to the public via a dedicated website ⁽⁶⁾.

NQF implementation

The road from adoption to implementation and operational status has proved complex for the Flemish NQF.

First, the transformation of the 2009 law into practice required further legal steps and the introduction of a series of 'implementation decrees', covering different parts of the education and training system. This made it possible to put in place precise and detailed procedures for placing and including qualifications into the framework ⁽⁷⁾.

Second, clarification of the role of the social partners in linking professional qualifications to the framework was needed and required substantial effort. Flemish professional qualifications are developed within a tripartite system, giving the social partners, in the context of the Social and Economic Committee (SERV), a decisive role. All professional qualifications build on competence

⁽⁶⁾ EVC – *erkennen van competenties*: <http://www.erkennenvancompetenties.be/> [accessed December 2016].

⁽⁷⁾ For an overview over legal initiatives between 2009 and 2017: <http://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/#>

standards defined and approved by the social partners: professional qualification has to reflect these competences and no single qualification can be approved without social partner input and approval. The 2009 law did not specify how the social partners would contribute to the levelling of qualifications; it was necessary to agree on how to approach this task. A general agreement – between the government and the SERV – on how to proceed was reached in 2011 and provides the basis for the current process. In December 2016 a total of 240 professional and 220 educational qualifications had been included in the framework. While time-consuming and challenging, the inclusion of professional qualifications into the FQF can be deemed a success as it demonstrates that stakeholders are fully involved and responsible for implementing the framework. The Flemish approach also demonstrates how competence standards developed for occupational purposes are being translated into professional qualifications.

It is also worth noting that vocational qualifications cover a wide span, currently covering levels 2 to 7 ⁽⁸⁾. This demonstrates the increasingly important role played by higher level vocational qualifications and also the ability of the framework to make this part of the qualification landscape more visible.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF was completed in June 2011. The referencing process was coordinated by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV). AKOV is also the EQF national coordination point for Flanders. The decision of the Flemish government to reference to the EQF in mid-2011, pending the placing of professional qualifications to the FQF, was discussed by the EQF advisory group. The lack of clarity in professional qualifications made it difficult for other countries to judge how Flemish qualifications compared to their own. Taking this criticism seriously, an updated referencing report was submitted in March 2014 (Government of Flanders and AKOV, 2014). This report responds to the points made by the EQF in 2011 and provides a detailed overview of subsequent developments. Following the implementation of FQF during 2012 and 2013, these levels are now filled with qualifications.

⁽⁸⁾ In December 2016, 37 qualifications had been placed at level 5, two at level 6 and two at level 7.

Further sources of information:

The website of the Flemish qualifications framework:

<http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/en/>

AHOVOKS (*Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen*), the agency for higher education, adult education, qualifications and study grants:

<https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/agentschap-voor-hoger-onderwijs-volwassenenonderwijs-kwalificaties-en-studietoelagen-ahovoks>

Flemish qualifications framework (FQF)

NQF levels	Educational qualifications	Professional qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctor	Recognised professional qualifications	8
7	Master Master after master	Recognised professional qualifications	7
6	Professional bachelor Academic bachelor Bachelor after bachelor	Recognised professional qualifications	6
5	Recognised professional qualifications	Recognised professional qualifications	5
4	Upper secondary general education Technical secondary education (third stage) Artistic secondary education (third stage) Supplementary general adult education	Recognised professional qualifications	4
3	Secondary vocational education, second year/third stage	Recognised professional qualifications	3
2	Adult basic education Second stage of secondary vocational education	Recognised professional qualifications	2
1	Primary education		1

Source: Flemish qualification database:

https://app.akov.be/pls/pakov/f?p=VLAAMSE_KWALIFICATIESTRUCTUUR:KWALIFICATIEDATABANK

List of abbreviations

AKOV	<i>Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming</i> [Agency for quality assurance in education and training]
AHOVOKS	<i>Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen</i> [Agency for higher education, adult education, qualifications and study grants]
EQF	European qualifications framework
FQF	Flemish qualifications framework
MBO	<i>middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> [upper secondary vocational education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVAO	<i>De Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie</i> [Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders]
RAC	recognition of acquired competences
SERV	Social and Economic Committee
VET	vocational education and training

References

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory for validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report Belgium*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

Government of Flanders; AKOV (2014). *Referencing of the Flemish qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework: update of the referencing report from July 2011*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/Referencing%20report%20Belgium%20Flanders_update%202014.pdf