



# EUROPEAN INVENTORY OF NQFs 2024

## **BELGIUM**

Flemish-speaking Community

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## 1. Introduction

Cedefop's work on qualifications frameworks dates back to 2003. The Centre has contributed to the conceptual development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and has supported its further implementation, working alongside with the of national authorities and stakeholders to introduce and develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). This report is part of the European inventory of NQFs, which systematically maps and analyses NQF developments in countries participating in the EQF process. The inventory is updated biennially in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation. The report provides a detailed description of the structure of the NQF of the Flemish Community in Belgium and its institutional arrangements. It also examines the framework's implementation and its impact on broader policy areas, focusing on key developments since 2022.

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 Flemish qualifications framework, FQF (*Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur, VKS*). It has eight levels and includes educational and professional qualifications (the latter can be awarded by providers operating within and outside the formal system). The FQF was referenced to the EQF in June 2011; updated reports have been submitted in 2014 and 2023. 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 2022, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product was 6.3%, which was 1.6 percentage points higher than the EU

average. The country performs above average on several key education and training indicators. In 2022, participation in early childhood education was 98.4%, while in 2023 the share of early leavers from education and training was 6.2%. In 2022, the share of upper secondary students in vocational education and training (VET) was 56.5%, while tertiary educational attainment (age 25-34) was 52.3% in 2023. Only participation of adults in learning (age 25-64) was lower than the EU average (34.9% and 39.5% respectively) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024).

## 2.2. NQF legal basis

The FQF was introduced with the adoption of the [decree on the qualification structure](#) in 2009. In the reform of secondary education launched in 2019 <sup>(1)</sup>, 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 parliamentary act on [Quality supervision for professionally qualifying programmes based on a common quality framework](#) and the parliamentary act 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 validation of prior learning that can lead to a professional qualification at any level of the FQF <sup>(2)</sup>. This ensures that all learners obtain the same set of skills.

## 3. NQF objectives

The qualifications system and the FQF 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.

## 4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

### 4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The FQF is based on an eight-level structure described by the categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility. Compared to the EQF, FQF

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<sup>(1)</sup> The reform of secondary education is expected to be completed in 2026 (European Commission & Cedefop, 2018).

<sup>(2)</sup> The scope of the decree on the common quality assurance framework, apart from covering providers operating within formal education, has also enabled other private or public organisations to offer programmes or validation arrangements leading to professional qualifications (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2019; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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 (see Section 4.2) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

#### **4.2. NQF scope and coverage**

The FQF incorporates educational qualifications (from primary education to doctoral degrees) and professional qualifications that can be awarded through programmes organised within and outside education, as well as through validation arrangements <sup>(3)</sup> (AHOVOKS, 2023; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Educational and professional qualifications should be understood as reference frameworks, which can be used by individual providers in developing an education or training programme <sup>(4)</sup>. In principle all eight levels are open to both. The process of including professional qualifications is on-going (38 new have been included and 23 have been updated since 2022). By September 2024, 582 professional qualifications (*Beroepskwalificaties*) and 79 partial professional qualifications (at levels 2 to 7), along with 1024 educational qualifications (*Onderwijskwalificatie*) <sup>(5)</sup>, had been included in the FQF and published in the qualifications database. 344 professional qualifications have been updated at least once; 13 professional qualifications have been omitted (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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

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<sup>(3)</sup> Educational qualifications can only be obtained via an offer in formal education. Professional qualifications can also be awarded upon successful completion of a pathway offered by public or private providers outside education and training, which is recognised and operating within the communal quality assurance framework.

<sup>(4)</sup> Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

<sup>(5)</sup> A total of 389 secondary education qualifications, 39 associate degree qualifications, 204 bachelor degree qualifications and 392 master degree qualifications (March 2025).

offered by education institutions formally recognised by the Flemish authorities. Depending on the level and form of education, professional qualifications can be building blocks of educational qualifications: vocationally oriented educational qualifications include the relevant professional qualification(s). Learners in such programmes can get a certificate of a partial or full professional qualification, even if they do not successfully complete the general part of the educational qualification. Secondary education programmes with orientation to higher education, and bachelor and master degree programmes do not contain professional qualifications. (Agency for Quality Assurance in Education & Training, 2012; AHOVOKS, 2023).

Professional qualifications are based on a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession <sup>(6)</sup>. They often build on each other in terms of content. For example, a learner can attend training as a baker, after completing training as an assistant baker, obtaining exemptions for the common competences (training can be offered by different providers). Partial qualifications are coherent sets of competences from a professional qualification, delineated during the development of the full qualification. They do not have a level, but the full qualification and its level is always mentioned on the certificate of the partial qualification <sup>(7)</sup>. For instance, the professional qualification ‘Technician on renewable energy techniques’ consists of four partial qualifications on: photovoltaic systems, heat pumps, biomass boilers and solar thermal systems. Learners holding a partial qualification can start working in a narrower segment of the labour market and/or obtain a full professional qualification following additional training or validation. A partial qualification could be considered a microcredential, although the term is not officially used when referring to partial qualifications (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The FQF does not distinguish between national and international qualifications <sup>(8)</sup>. If a provider of international qualifications wants to offer a programme leading to a professional qualification, the provider should be recognised through the procedure determined in the act on the common quality assurance framework (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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<sup>(6)</sup> Since 2018, an FQF level can be assigned to professional qualifications for social roles. A social role is defined as a coherent set of tasks with associated competences aimed at a specific social functioning in the context of voluntary work or leisure work (e.g. amateur performing actor (AHOVOKS, 2023).

<sup>(7)</sup> Partial qualifications cannot be developed on their own, thus they cannot be individually included and levelled to the FQF. They are part of the FQF because the full qualification is included (Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS).

<sup>(8)</sup> Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

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 degree ( <i>Universiteit – Master</i> ) Advanced master 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 degree ( <i>Universiteit – Bachelor</i> ) Professional bachelor degree ( <i>Hogeschool – Bachelor</i> ) Advanced bachelor programme ( <i>bachelor na bachelor – banaba</i> )	Examples: dietitian ( <i>Diëtist</i> ) dental technologist ( <i>Dentaaaltechnoloog</i> ) textile designer ( <i>Textielontwerper</i> )	6
5	Associate degree (short cycle higher education) ( <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	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate ( <i>Algemeen Secundair Onderwijs - ASO</i> ) Upper secondary technical education school leaving certificate ( <i>Technisch Secundair Onderwijs - TSO</i> ) Upper secondary artistic education leaving certificate ( <i>Kunstsecundair Onderwijs - KSO</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 assistant</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> )	2

NQF level	Educational qualification	Professional qualification	EQF level
		bakery and pastry-shop employee ( <i>Medewerker brood- en banketbakkerij</i> )	
1	Certificate of elementary education (6 years)		1

Source: European Commission & Cedefop, (2024).

### 4.3. Use of learning outcomes

The FQF provides a clear commitment to focus on the learning-outcomes approach regarding both policy level and the design of programmes and qualifications. 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 <sup>(9)</sup>, 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 <sup>(10)</sup>.

In VET, 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 or technical education are well prepared for the labour market, with a good balance between basic skills, general knowledge and professional competences.

At post-secondary level, specialisation programmes are offered as follow-up programmes. They can enable progression to higher education, or they can be labour market oriented. All specialisation programmes are linked to an FQF educational or professional qualification <sup>(11)</sup>. Developments have also occurred at EQF level 5, in courses leading to associate degrees, which have been updated to be based on at least one professional qualification (see Section 7.2). All associate degree programmes are based on a professional qualification (European

<sup>(9)</sup> 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.

<sup>(10)</sup> More information in Cedefop & ReferNet (2023).

<sup>(11)</sup> Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

Commission & Cedefop, 2020). In this way, labour market needs are reflected also in level 5 short-cycle higher education programmes <sup>(12)</sup>.

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 (PES) (*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 common quality assurance framework for professional qualifications enables the PES and other public or private providers (e.g. interprofessional social partners) to offer recognised training programmes leading to FQF full and partial professional qualifications.

Developments in higher education have been influenced by the Bologna process. A clear strengthening of the learning-outcomes principle has taken place in Flanders. At levels 5 to 8, higher education institutions are obliged to jointly describe the subject-specific learning outcomes for higher education courses (see Section 7.2).

#### **4.4. Quality assurance arrangements**

The Education Inspectorate monitors adult education and dual and non-dual training programmes in secondary education and adjusts their quality framework accordingly. The inspectorate uses professional and educational qualifications as a reference framework during their visits to secondary, adult and special needs education institutions (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020; 2024). The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (*Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie – NVAO*) is responsible for the external quality assurance of the process of developing educational qualifications (see Section 7.2) and ensures the quality of higher education <sup>(13)</sup> by assessing and accrediting programmes, and contributing to improving quality. Since 2019, the common quality assurance framework for professional qualifications ensures quality of training and validation programmes. Public and private institutions and organisations can award certificates of professional qualifications, provided they are accredited according to specific quality criteria at organisational and programme level, while they are also subject to inspection visits (AHOVOKS, 2023; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The procedure of developing and including professional and educational qualifications in the FQF comprises specific requirements and methods, guaranteeing the quality of qualifications (see Section 7.2).

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<sup>(12)</sup> More information in the '[Policy note 2019–2024 – Work and social economy](#)'.

<sup>(13)</sup> The [European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education](#).

## 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 (NCP) and is responsible for coordinating the FQF implementation process, 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 qualifications <sup>(14)</sup>. The AHOVOKS Qualifications and Curriculum Unit 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 & 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 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. AHOVOKS aims to keep close cooperation with the stakeholders involved in all its core activities. For instance, a variety of stakeholders is actively involved in the development of professional qualifications (see Section 7.2).

## 6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

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

In Flanders, the term *erkennen van verworven competenties (EVC)* (recognition of acquired competences) is used to refer to the validation of non-formal, informal, and formal learning that hasn't led to a formal (partial) qualification. The FQF plays a crucial role as the reference framework for validation. Candidates successfully

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<sup>(14)</sup> AHOVOKS has made available a self-assessment instrument to help organisations assess the quality of their validation procedures.

completing a validation procedure, obtain an FQF professional qualification. Thus, validation, as is currently implemented, would not be feasible without the FQF. In general, the certificates acquired through validation are equivalent with the qualifications and credits acquired through professional and educational programmes (Kimps, 2024; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The [decrees on a common quality assurance framework for professional qualifications at all levels](#) and on the [recognition of acquired competences](#) (see Section 2.2) serve as the legal basis for the external quality assurance system for all courses and validation arrangements leading to FQF professional qualifications. Validation standards are based on professional qualifications. Validation outcomes are stackable and can lead to a full professional qualification. Professional (partial) qualifications, acquired through validation, can be recognised by education providers, thus enabling learners to get exemptions from an educational qualification that includes them. EVC standards have already been developed for 36 professional qualifications <sup>(15)</sup>. The PES 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 common 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 (Kimps, 2024; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Validation arrangements increase the flexibility of the education system; they are all linked to the FQF. In secondary education, validation can give the opportunity to individuals to get exemptions or a full qualification just by taking exams in the presence of an Exam Committee. In higher education validation can usually lead to credits/exemptions towards a qualification; in principle it can even lead to a full qualification (it seldom happens). Validation can also give to persons without a secondary education qualification, access through a special ‘entrance examination’ (*‘toelatingsonderzoek’*) to bachelor programmes or through an entrance test (*‘toelatingsproef’*) to associate degree programmes (Kimps, 2024).

## 6.2. Credit systems

A credit system, based on the ECTS, is only used in higher education, where the workload of the programmes is expressed in credits. The associate degree comprises 90 or 120 credits. If the competences of an FQF level 5 professional qualification can be obtained through a programme of 90 to 120 credits, it can form the basis for an associate degree. If these competences can be acquired in a

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<sup>(15)</sup> Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS.

programme of less than 90 credits, the professional qualification can be offered in adult education. Academic and professional bachelor degrees comprise a minimum of 180 credits, while master degrees have at least 60 credits. Learners passing the exam of an individual course component are awarded a credit certificate for the subject in question (AHOVOKS, 2023).

### 6.3. Promoting lifelong learning

The FQF, along with the user-friendly qualifications database, is a crucial tool for lifelong learning, illustrating to the broad public the available learning pathways. The Lifelong Learning Partnership, set up in 2020, aiming to transform Flanders into a learning society developed an [action plan](#) in 2021. The action plan acknowledges that professional qualifications have become the basis for education, training and validation arrangements, thus a reference framework for lifelong learning. These qualifications make expected learning outcomes clear and provide a common language between education and training providers, ensuring a common approach in policy implementation (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

## 7. NQF implementation and impact

### 7.1. Stage of implementation

The FQF is operational. A series of implementation decrees have been adopted, covering professional, educational qualifications and validation arrangements and promoting the implementation of the FQF.

### 7.2. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

The procedures for including (full and partial) professional and educational qualifications in the FQF and for updating professional qualifications are determined in the Parliamentary Act on the Flemish Qualifications Structure.

Labour market actors (sectoral and/or interprofessional social partners and PES) or social organisations are responsible for developing a professional qualification dossier. They are supported by AHOVOKS, which coordinates the procedure. The dossier is developed based on one or more professional competence profiles <sup>(16)</sup>; it should indicate the sectors involved, the title of the partial qualification(s) (if applicable), the competences provided, an analysis of the labour market/social relevance and the coherence with other dossiers or

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<sup>(16)</sup> The profiles are retrieved by the [Competent](#) database. These profiles are drafted and used by the Flemish PES (Source: Internal communication with AHOVOKS).

recognised professional and educational qualifications. The dossier is submitted to AHOVOKS, which performs a quality check. Then, the dossier is validated, according to specific method and criteria, by a validation committee composed of an independent chairman, two employees of AHOVOKS (responsible for the secretariat and quality assurance), two representatives of the interprofessional social partners (appointed by the Social and Economic Council of Flanders - *Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen*, SERV), one of the PES, and one appointed by the Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (*Agentschap Innoveren en Ondernemen*, Vlaio). The validation committee for qualifications for social roles is composed of representatives from leisure and voluntary work, two employees of AHOVOKS (secretariat and quality assurance) and an independent chairman. If the decision is positive (the committee can also reject or ask for a revision of the dossier), a classification committee determines the level of the qualification. The classification committee consists of seven representatives of employers' organisations and trade unions, appointed by the SERV (or representatives from leisure and voluntary work), five representatives of education providers appointed by the Flemish Education Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*, Vlor), two representatives of public training providers, appointed by the PES and Vlaio and two independent classification experts from AHOVOKS. The committee applies a specific classification method. Subsequently, AHOVOKS reviews the procedure to ensure that it is quality-assured and drafts a recommendation for the Flemish Government which will recognise the professional qualification. Then the qualification will be registered in the qualification database (see section 7.5) (AHOVOKS, 2023).

AHOVOKS designs educational qualifications proposals at FQF levels 1 to 4. A proposal includes the attainment and specific attainment targets of the qualification and the professional or partial qualifications that it comprises. AHOVOKS also produces a desirability opinion on developing the qualification. Based on the proposal, the Flemish Education Council issues advice. The Flemish Government will recognise the qualification based on a joint proposal of the ministers for education and labour. Finally, AHOVOKS registers the qualification in the database (AHOVOKS, 2023).

AHOVOKS examines if recognised professional qualifications at FQF level 5 can be used to form an educational qualification at this level. The Flemish Council of University Colleges provides an advice on the study load (in credits), the name and possible study fields. If AHOVOKS issues a positive desirability advice, it incorporates a recommendation on the study load. Based on this advice the Government will decide if the educational qualification will be developed. Then the university colleges will cooperatively set the domain-specific learning outcomes,

which will be validated by NVAO. The last step is registering the educational qualification in the database (AHOVOKS, 2023).

The Flemish Council of Universities and University Colleges coordinates higher education institutions in drafting the domain specific learning outcomes of programmes leading to qualifications at levels 6 to 8. Then, the learning outcomes are validated by NVAO, are automatically recognised as educational qualifications and registered in the qualifications database. Since learning outcomes are a crucial element of the quality assurance system, NVAO will never accredit a higher education programme without a validated set of domain-specific learning outcomes (AHOVOKS, 2023).

### **7.3. Indicating EQF/NQF levels**

FQF and EQF levels are indicated on all qualifications included in the framework. The only exception is the certificate of elementary education at FQF level 1. NQF levels are only indicated on higher education diploma supplements (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

### **7.4. NQF dissemination**

Although there is no specific FQF communication strategy, promoting the use of the framework is part of the communication policy plan of each education and training sector; for instance, in actions related to professional qualifications, validation or secondary education. So far, the FQF's communication efforts have primarily been oriented towards partners at the macro and meso levels (e.g. PES, social partners, sectoral organisations and education agencies, authorities and institutions); more recently actions also aim to reach the broader public via intermediate actors. Information about the FQF and about related seminars and meetings with sectoral organisations is disseminated via the [FQF website](#); links to an [FQF brochure](#) and an [informative animated video](#) are also available. In 2023, a flyer with information on the FQF/EQF and on included professional and educational qualifications, as well as a [booklet](#) presenting the available programmes at the second and third stage of secondary education, along with the available further learning pathways were developed and widely disseminated (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

### **7.5. 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 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 indicates which professional qualifications are part of each educational qualification. Short descriptions of the learning outcomes of FQF qualifications are currently being drafted but not yet publicly available. The database is connected to the database of the Agency for Educational Services and to the Europass platform (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

The [Programme database](#) includes all programmes and training profiles under the responsibility of the Flemish government. The training profiles display attainment targets, basic competences of a particular programme, competences of professional qualification (when applicable), the minimal number of teaching hours and the number of modules. The programme and qualifications databases are interconnecting with the latter feeding data into the programme database (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Since 2021, the [LED \(Leer- en ervaringsbewijzen\) database](#) has also been available. It includes all qualifications and certificates recognised or declared equivalent by the Flemish Community, along with the corresponding minimal identification details of the citizen holding them. Registration of the qualifications and certificates is managed by the entity that has issued them. Citizens can log into their profile and access their qualification certificates (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

#### **7.6. Awareness and use of the NQF**

Education and training providers, along with labour market representatives (such as interprofessional social partners) are aware of the FQF, as they are involved in developing professional qualifications and including them in the framework. It also functions as a reference for quality assurance, developing and renewing qualifications and programmes, and developing and aligning validation arrangements (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

#### **7.7. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF**

In 2022, the evaluation of professional qualifications from a user perspective was carried out. Opinions differ depending on the study field and the end users of each qualification. However, there is overall agreement that professional qualifications meet their objectives, ensuring a better connection to the labour market, being transparent and understandable by the actors involved, and offering a solid basis to form the content of education and training programmes as they are used by all providers. However, major challenges include the lack of clarity in describing the learning outcomes of certain qualifications, and the extent that providers have sufficient space and pedagogical freedom to address their specific needs (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; AHOVOKS, 2023).

### **7.8. Impact of the NQF**

The FQF, in combination with the introduction of the learning outcomes approach, has increased the transparency and comparability of qualifications. The policy objective of implementing learning outcomes in education and training has triggered the set-up of the FQF, along with other reforms (for example, in secondary education). At the same time, the FQF has contributed to further promoting the learning-outcomes approach as a valuable tool in lifelong learning. For instance, stakeholders should be informed on how to draft learning outcomes, to address the competence needs of the labour market, and to design programmes in a way that smaller units of competences can be certified and stackable, leading to a full qualification. The framework has contributed to the continuous review and renewal of qualifications and to fostering the quality assurance of qualifications (see Sections 4.4 and 7.2). The NARIC operates on the basis of the FQF and the EQF, while referencing the framework to the EQF has also helped the recognition of Flemish qualifications abroad, promoting international mobility (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

The FQF has strengthened the links and transparency between educational and professional qualifications. Especially, professional qualifications (both individually and as parts of educational qualifications) have increased the flexibility of education and training, facilitating horizontal and vertical permeability, strengthening bridges and parity of esteem between sub-systems and institutions. Learners can use them to get exemptions in a relevant programme, while partial professional qualifications are stackable. FQF professional or educational qualifications have the same value, regardless of how they are awarded. Qualifications are a common frame of reference, transcending all providers as their work is based on the same qualifications. Further, the common quality assurance framework has linked the validation of prior learning to the FQF. The procedure of developing and including in the FQF professional qualifications and educational qualifications (that incorporate professional) brings together a broad variety of stakeholders. Thus, cooperation across education and training subsystems and between them and the labour market is enhanced. Consequently, the way professional qualifications are drafted enables the education and training system to address labour market needs and potentially improve the employability of learners. Labour market actors can indicate that a profession is not covered by an existing qualification. Once recognised, the new or updated professional qualification can be converted into programmes, covering a possible gap in education and training (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

## 8. Referencing to the EQF

The FQF was referenced to the EQF in June 2011; updated reports have been submitted in 2014 and 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 & Cedefop, 2022; 2024). Although time-consuming and challenging, it demonstrates that stakeholders are fully involved. Further, the fact that FQF qualifications are a common frame of reference to providers facilitates more successful implementation of lifelong learning policies and offers a common language. The common quality framework and the decree on recognition of acquired competences, have broadened the scope of the FQF, building trust in professional qualifications awarded either through programmes or validation arrangements. The FQF is also seen as an instrument reshaping the structure and content of secondary and higher VET.

Despite the improvements brought about by the development and introduction of the FQF, there are still issues to be addressed. A main challenge is balancing between what is defined in qualifications and how much space is left to providers to 'shape' a programme. AHOVOKS have taken into consideration the recommendations of the evaluation of professional qualifications in shaping its priorities:

- (a) aligning the education and training programmes related to professional qualifications;
- (b) drafting more cross-disciplinary and less detailed competences as well as short descriptions of the learning outcomes of professional qualifications;
- (c) developing FQF communication material, targeting various groups;
- (d) linking qualifications and learning opportunities to the new Europass portal;
- (e) including in the LED database smaller (partial) qualifications.

## 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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