

# CROATIA

## European inventory on NQF 2016

### Introduction and context

Education and training reform in Croatia is driven by a comprehensive *Strategy for education, science and technology*, adopted by parliament in 2014 (Croatian Parliament, 2014), aiming to develop all education and training subsystems. Clearly defined outcomes of every education segment, where the Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) is an important tool, are seen a precondition for reform. While relatively few people leave school early (2.7% in 2014, compared with the EU average of 11.1%), and a high proportion of secondary vocational education graduates progress onto higher education, the country still faces important challenges, including the relevance of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education for employability, and low participation in lifelong learning (2.5% in 2014, compared to the EU average of 10.7%) (European Commission, 2015).

The development of the CROQF started in 2006 and aims to modernise secondary VET, higher education and adult education in line with the demands of the labour market. The CROQF Act (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2013), adopted in 2013, established the CROQF and set out the legislative and institutional framework for its further development and implementation. It is a single, comprehensive framework, which has eight levels and two sublevels, described in terms of learning outcomes: knowledge, skills and level of autonomy and responsibility. It also incorporates credit systems. It includes qualifications from all levels and subsystems of formal education and training (general education, vocational education and training and higher education) and will be the basis for developing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The CROQF was linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in 2012.

### Policy objectives

The main aims for the development of the CROQF are to enable better communication and coordination between stakeholders in the qualifications system; to provide a basis for transparency of qualifications and aid access,

progression and recognition; and to act as a tool for reforming national education and training, promoting the use of learning outcomes, the application of quality assurance systems and the development of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The CROQF builds on reforms under way since 2005, such as developing new education standards and national curricula for general education and VET reform, as well as introducing the State *matura*.

Besides enabling the link with the EQF (and with the QF-EHEA), allowing for international comparability of Croatian qualifications, the framework is seen as reflecting national needs and priorities and as an instrument for developing new education and training solutions specific to the Croatian context:

- (a) better linking education and training with labour market needs;
- (b) improving social inclusion and equity;
- (c) improving pathways between subsystems and between sectors;
- (d) making qualifications transparent and more consistent with the use of learning outcomes;
- (e) supporting lifelong learning and employability.

Specific CROQF objectives also include setting up a system for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and creating a comprehensive quality assurance system (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2014).

## Levels and use of learning outcomes

Strengthening learning outcomes is seen as an essential part of CROQF development and is supported by major stakeholder groups. The CROQF is a qualifications and a credit framework. It has eight reference levels, in line with the EQF, but with two additional sublevels at levels 4 and 8 to cater for existing qualifications.

Each qualification in the CROQF is defined in terms of profile (field of work or study), reference level (complexity of acquired competences) and volume/workload (credit points) <sup>(1)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Three credit systems are used to measure the volume of qualifications and of learning outcomes: the Croatian credit system for general education (HROO), the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET), and the European credit transfer and accumulation system for higher education (ECTS).

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge (theoretical and factual) and skills (cognitive, practical and social skills). A third descriptor is defined as responsibility and autonomy. Although some key competences are explicitly indicated in the CROQF, it is emphasised that key competences should be included in each qualification (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2014).

The CROQF introduces two classes of qualification: full and partial. For example, a qualification with a minimum of 180 ECVET and/or HROO points (from which a minimum of 120 ECVET and/or HROO points are required at the fourth reference level or higher) is referenced to level 4.1. For a qualification at level 4.2, a minimum of 240 ECVET and/or HROO points are required (a minimum of 150 ECVET and/or HROO points at the fourth reference level or higher) (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2014).

The CROQF plays a central role in developing and implementing the learning outcomes approach in all subsystems of education and training, building on the reforms so far. The *Strategy for education, science and technology* (Croatian Parliament, 2014) aims to establish conditions for high quality education and training and emphasises the role of the CROQF in developing learning outcomes, as well as the need to develop learning outcomes and skills in line with the demands of the labour market.

Since 2006 VET has been gradually changed and oriented towards the learning outcomes approach. Thirteen VET sectoral councils were established and have been in operation from 2006 to 2014. Methodologies for developing occupational and qualification standards were established in 2011. Twenty-six pilot VET programmes – based on occupational standards and modularised – are in the 3rd year of implementation (since 2013/14).

The State *matura* was introduced in 2010 as an obligatory final exam (including Croatian language, mathematics, the first foreign language and the mother tongue for ethnic minority pupils) for gymnasium graduates and as an optional choice for VET graduates on completion of four-year programmes.

Higher education has undergone extensive change in the last decade, including strengthening the learning outcomes dimension. The decision (2001) to take part in the Bologna process made it necessary for Croatia to adjust its higher education system significantly. Introduction of undergraduate (first cycle) and graduate (second cycle) programmes started in 2005. The change of curricula is intended to develop competences needed on the labour market, but the functional link between higher education institutions and the labour market, and the social community in particular, has not yet been well established.

## Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

Major stakeholders from public authorities, learning providers, employers, and other social partners were involved in all phases of CROQF development.

The CROQF Act (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2013) sets up the institutional and legislative framework for CROQF implementation and defines the involvement, roles and responsibilities of key bodies and stakeholders. The National Council for Development of Human Potential was appointed by the Croatian Parliament in June 2014, as the strategic body for developing and implementing the CROQF. It comprises 24 representatives of national ministries, regional structures, social partners, education providers and national agencies involved in developing and awarding qualifications in different subsystems of education and training <sup>(2)</sup>. This body oversees policies in education, training, employment and human resource development and monitors and evaluates the CROQF's impact. The variety of stakeholders actively involved in the National Council is both the strength of the current governance arrangement, as it ensures wide consensus on matters regarding the NQF, and also its weakness, as the decision-making process may take a long time and may slow down implementation.

On a technical and policy level, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports coordinates the development and implementation of the CROQF, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Pension System. The main tasks of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports include: setting up and maintaining the national CROQF register, establishing and coordinating the work of sectoral councils, providing support to the National Council for Development of Human Potential, developing procedures related to standards of qualifications, developing a system of validation of non-formal learning, and informing the public about the CROQF. The main tasks on the Ministry of Labour and Pension System include managing the subregister of occupational standards and developing procedures related to occupational standards.

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<sup>(2)</sup> The National Council for Development of Human Potential consists of representatives of the following institutions: Ministry of Science and Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Regional Development, regional structures, associations of unions, associations of employers, civil society organisations, the Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the sectoral councils, higher education institutions, adult education institutions, the Agency for Education and Teacher Training, the Agency for Vocational Education, the Agency for Science and Higher Education, and the Croatian employment service.

The Ministry of Education is also the EQF national coordination point (NCP). The budget for NQF-related activities comes from various sources, such as the State budget, the EQF NCP grant, and the European Social Fund for projects implemented by higher education institutions and the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. Most funds are directed towards NQF development and research <sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition, 25 sectoral councils (advisory and professional bodies ensuring the development of human potential in line with labour market needs in their respective sectors) are in the process of being established. By the end of 2015, eight out of the 25 sectoral councils had been established and started their activities.

## Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways <sup>(4)</sup>

One explicit aim of the CROQF is to set up a system for validating non-formal and informal learning <sup>(5)</sup>. Article 15 of the CROQF Act foresees the creation of an ordinance on recognition and validation that will specify the procedure in detail and establish a closer link to CROQF. The National Council for Development of Human Potential plans to produce a strategic plan for developing a system for validating non-formal and informal learning, as a basis for developing the ordinance.

Further, the *Strategy for education, science and technology* (Croatian Parliament, 2014) recognises validation as an essential part of lifelong learning.

In recent years, most education and training sector effort has been focused on CROQF-related developments, building on development of occupational and qualifications standards, as well as on national curriculum reform. These are seen as a foundation for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Building on previous work, two key methodologies have been developed recently, in the format of national level guidelines: the methodology for the developing occupational standards <sup>(6)</sup> and the methodology for qualifications standards <sup>(7)</sup>.

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<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

<sup>(4)</sup> 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).

<sup>(5)</sup> Article 3 of the CROQF Act (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2013).

<sup>(6)</sup> [www.kvalifikacije.hr/fgs.axd?id=1127](http://www.kvalifikacije.hr/fgs.axd?id=1127)

In practice, validation of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education and training is still rare. No access to formal qualifications can be granted without formal learning. Validation arrangements are in place for adult education and crafts. For instance, a master craftsperson exam can validate and recognise non-formally acquired knowledge and competences. Some providers in higher education have developed internal guidelines for recognising prior learning for specific purposes, such as admission to certain higher education programmes or allocation of ECTS credits in the framework of accredited study programmes.

## NQF implementation

Following adoption of the ordinance on the CROQF register (May, 2014) <sup>(8)</sup>, the CROQF entered an early operational stage. The ordinance stipulates the content and management of the register, procedures for requests, assessment, and entry of qualifications into the register. The name of sectoral councils and criteria for the selection of new council members and their operational activities, as well as the internal and external quality assurance systems, are also included. The new CROQF register brings together three subregisters: a register of occupational standards, a register of qualifications standards, and units/modules of learning outcomes. Proposals for occupation and qualification standards are currently being developed as part of the implementation of 55 projects jointly financed from the European Social Fund. The development of the CROQF register (and the inclusion of standards within the register) is still to be finalised before the CROQF becomes operational.

As stated in the ordinance on the CROQF register, programmes which are included in the register need to be in line with CROQF standards and developed according to CROQF procedures, but they must be approved in accordance with existing legislation. It is expected that the register will enable exchanges with existing databases.

The main challenge in implementing the system is how to secure quality assurance procedures and principles to improve all current procedures across education sectors. New procedures have been introduced to ensure the quality of different processes related to the development and use of CROQF.

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<sup>(7)</sup> [www.kvalifikacije.hr/fgs.axd?id=994](http://www.kvalifikacije.hr/fgs.axd?id=994)

<sup>(8)</sup> Ordinance on the CROQF register (*Pravilnik o Registru Hrvatskog kvalifikacijskog okvira*): <http://www.kvalifikacije.hr/Default.aspx>

Other challenges are linked to the timely establishment of the new sectoral councils and capacity-building of their members, as well as the capacities of ministries and agencies responsible for their coordination and administration. Eight of the 25 sectoral councils proposed in the CROQF Act (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2013) were established by the end of 2015; the remaining 17 sectoral councils should be in place in 2016. In establishing the new sectoral councils, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports has taken into account the experience of the previous VET sectoral councils. Training for members of the (new) sectoral councils includes a presentation on the achievements of the (previous) VET sectoral councils.

The ordinance on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is under development.

As far as the current legal framework is concerned, creating education programmes in line with the CROQF is not mandatory, although it represents a mark of quality <sup>(9)</sup>. For CROQF to become mandatory, all existing laws governing different education subsectors would need to be changed.

The National Council for Development of Human Potential has issued recommendations for using the CROQF in adult education: for preparing and approving formal programmes, for accrediting and reaccrediting institutions, and for the external evaluation of learning outcomes of formal programmes. The new draft law on adult education was published for public debate in August 2016. Having considered the national council's recommendations, it envisages that all formal adult education programmes will be approved according to CROQF methodology.

As recommended by the national council in December 2015, the CROQF will be used by the Agency for Science and Higher Education for the initial accreditation and reaccreditation of study programmes in higher education. It is also recommended that CROQF should be used by public universities for their internal quality assurance systems and that higher education institutions should use CROQF for preparing and revising study programmes.

The CROQF has currently been made visible to higher and adult education institutions, schools and other institutions which receive (or have applied for) funding to implement CROQF-related projects <sup>(10)</sup>, and to employers who were surveyed in connection with these projects. Further, the National Council for the

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<sup>(9)</sup> In addition, standards and programmes developed within projects co-funded from EU funds must be in line with CROQF, which has a 'positive discrimination' effect by encouraging providers to use CROQF.

<sup>(10)</sup> Projects aimed to create occupation and qualification standards.

Development of Human Potential organised a conference (*CROQF – knowledge and creativity*) in October 2015, which brought together more than 200 participants. A similar conference is planned for October 2016. Additional methods of raising awareness of the framework among potential users include the CROQF website, which is continuously updated with news, a newsletter issued several times a year and distributed to potential users, publications, and public events organised by groups involved in implementing the framework.

## Referencing to the EQF

Croatia referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to QF-EHEA in March 2012, and published a joint report in 2014 (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2014).

Given that there are currently no occupation and qualification standards in the CROQF register, nor any education programmes aligned with CROQF standards, CROQF/EQF levels do not yet appear on certificates and diplomas or on the Europass certificate and diploma supplements. As soon as standards are developed and included in the register, and should it become compulsory to align education programmes with CROQF standards, it is anticipated that levels will be included on all certificates and diplomas.

## Important lessons and the way forward

The relatively rapid development of the CROQF illustrates the importance of stimulating active and broad participation throughout the entire process. Complemented by targeted support for, and training of, stakeholders, it can support genuine partnerships. Progressive, step-by-step development is emphasised. It has, so far, been an inclusive process, with meetings, workshops, conferences and consultations with different groups of stakeholders, including more than 10 000 individuals. However, it is still not easy to evaluate the ownership of the CROQF among different stakeholders: it will become more visible once the register is fully operational. So far, levels of ownership have been highest among ministries involved in preparing the ordinance on the CROQF register, but it is gradually being accepted by others through participation in events and projects.

However, much needs to be done to develop or redefine qualifications so they can be aligned with CROQF levels. The secondary legislation that is

currently under development, such as the ordinance on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, will need to be adopted. For the CROQF to become operational, its principles and application, and the legislation that regulates the different education subsystems, will have to be further aligned with each other. Occupation and qualification standards will have to be developed and included in the CROQF register.

The current thinking behind the new Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education, to make qualification standards in the CROQF register mandatory for all new study programmes, has led to concerns about the autonomy of higher education institutions. It will be important to clarify the role of the framework for the various education and training subsystems and the nature of its regulatory function. Another related and open question that remains is the extent to which Croatian qualifications will be defined and regulated through the CROQF or through existing legislation at subsystem level.

**Further source of information**

The CROQF Website is available at <http://www.kvalifikacije.hr/hko-en>

## Croatian national qualifications framework (CROQF)

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8.2	Doctor diploma	8
8.1	Postgraduate research master of science diploma <i>poslijediplomski znanstveni magistarski studiji</i>	
7	Master diploma (graduate university studies) <i>sveučilišni diplomski studiji</i>	7
	Professional master diploma (specialist graduate professional studies) <i>specijalistički diplomski stručni studiji</i>  Post-master specialist university studies <i>poslijediplomski specijalistički studiji</i>	
6	Bachelor diploma (undergraduate university studies) <i>sveučilišni preddiplomski studiji</i>	6
	Professional bachelor diploma (undergraduate professional studies) <i>stručni preddiplomski studiji</i>	
5	Professional higher education diploma (short cycle) <i>kratki stručni studiji</i>	5
	VET post-secondary development and training certificate <i>strukovno specijalističko usavršavanje i osposobljavanje</i>  Master craftsman diploma	
4.2	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate Upper secondary VET certificate (four years) Upper secondary VET certificate (five years) for nursing technicians	4
4.1	Upper secondary VET (three years)	
3	Upper secondary VET certificate (two years) Upper secondary VET certificate (one year)	3
2	Vocational training certificate	2
1	Primary education certificate (eight years*)	1

(\*) First eight years of schooling are called primary education. It refers to both ISCED 1 and 2 (primary and secondary education).

Source: Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (Article 8), 2013.

## List of abbreviations

CROQF	Croatian qualifications framework
EQF	European qualifications framework
HROO	Croatian credit system for general education
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework in the European higher education area
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
VET	vocational education and training

## References

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European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report Croatia*.