

CYPRUS

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The recent economic crisis, and its adverse effects on the labour market, was a critical challenge for the Cypriot education and training system, negatively affecting its potential for growth. However, the crisis also revealed inherent weaknesses in the economy. As a result, greater flexibility is being demanded of education and training to target support for the unemployed ⁽¹⁾, the economically inactive and the employed. Cyprus has developed a comprehensive national qualifications framework called the Cyprus qualifications framework (CYQF) to improve permeability, both horizontal and vertical, within its education and training systems. CYQF incorporates all levels and types of qualifications from all subsystems of education and training and from primary to higher education. The system of vocational qualifications (SVQ) being developed by the Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) is an integral, but distinct, part of CYQF. Discussions are being held to develop common structures and elements for combining and transferring education credits.

A decision to create a NQF was taken by the Council of Ministers in 2008. A first NQF draft, with a detailed timetable for implementation, was presented in April 2010 and consultation with stakeholders took place in spring 2011. The NQF is currently being revised and is expected to be finalised in 2016.

Policy objectives

CYQF's main role is to classify qualifications according to agreed learning outcomes. The reform potential (Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015) of the NQF is recognised by its link to wider and more ambitious reforms and

⁽¹⁾ The employment rate in 2015 is increasing, but remains largely below the values reached in the pre-crisis period when Cyprus was already fulfilling its national target. Cyprus has already reached the Europe 2020 national target for early school leaving, while still continuing to make significant progress in tackling this issue. Cyprus has one of the highest tertiary education attainment rates in the EU with 52.5%, compared to the European average of 37.9% in 2014 and largely outperforms its Europe 2020 national target of 46% (European Commission, 2015).

procedures for quality assurance, assessment and award of qualifications. More specific objectives and targets are:

- (a) supporting recognition and validation of qualifications;
- (b) enabling progression and mobility;
- (c) promoting lifelong learning through better understanding of learning opportunities, improved access to education and training, creation of incentives for participation, more flexibility in transferring credits between qualifications and recognition of prior learning;
- (d) improving quality assurance of education and training programmes;
- (e) strengthening links with the labour market.

The aim is to develop an inclusive framework of qualifications awarded outside formal education. This will primarily be achieved by including the vocational qualifications system – established by HRDA – within the framework (at levels 3 to 7) to bring about comparability and better correlation of qualifications acquired in formal or non-formal learning. These qualifications refer to occupational standards and certificated learning outcomes acquired at work. This is important for increasing adult participation in lifelong learning (LLL) (currently at 6.9%), which remains below the EU average of 10.7% in 2014 and which is stagnating (European Commission, 2015). This is clearly linked to the aim of the NQF to promote lifelong learning, giving all Cypriots a second chance for educational advancement and job progression.

A further policy objective is to reinforce vocational education and training (VET) at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels through a new framework initiative: the Cyprus Productivity Centre (CPC). Through the new modern apprenticeship scheme (Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015), CPC aims to provide alternative learning pathways and increased employability, based on the needs of the labour market, for those who leave formal education without basic or vocational skills. The setting-up and upgrading of post-secondary VET institutes (MIEEK) is a major step towards attracting more students to this pathway.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

An eight-level reference structure has been adopted to reflect the national qualification system's main characteristics. Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. Knowledge is defined by the type and complexity of knowledge demanded and the ability to place one's knowledge in context. Skills are defined according to the complexity of problem-solving and

communication skills involved. Competence relates to the following aspects: space of action, cooperation and responsibility, and learning skills. These descriptors were developed concurrently for all levels so there would be clear progression from one level to the next.

The current qualifications system is based on data (quality of teachers, infrastructure, and length of education and training programmes). Assessment of learning outcomes is not presently covered by national legislation, policy documents or development programmes. However, attention is increasingly being directed to the need to focus on skills and key competences (that are required in the 21st century), and to revise curricula, learning programmes and assessment methodologies in line with learning outcomes. Several reforms are under way, such as modernising pre-primary and upper secondary curricula, and improving VET by introducing post-secondary VET institutes. Strong emphasis is being given to improving teacher competences and establishing and monitoring the quality of learning outcomes. NQF implementation will benefit from the experience gained in developing competence-based vocational qualifications. These will be based on occupational standards and will make it possible to award a qualification to a candidate irrespective of how and where they acquired the relevant knowledge, skills and competences.

Learning outcomes are mainly expressed in formal education as part of subject and stage-based general education. In the curriculum, learning outcomes are described as the knowledge, skills and attitudes, and awareness learners are expected to achieve at the end of each stage. Level descriptors indicate the standards a learner should achieve at each certificated level of education. The development of a single unified curriculum from pre-primary to primary and lower secondary education, based on learning outcomes, is an important goal.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The general directorate for VET at the Ministry of Education and Culture initiated and is coordinating NQF developments. Since 2012, the Ministry of Education has operated as the competent authority and designated EQF national coordination point (NCP). It includes representatives from all departments of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance and the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA). Stakeholders play a central role in existing validation practices but there is limited involvement from social partners (such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽²⁾

There is no comprehensive national strategy or policy in Cyprus for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The validation practices currently in place are fragmented and limited. Existing validation does not cover all stages identified in the Council recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012), nor is the same terminology used consistently. Current practices mostly relate to assessment and certification of prior work experience; they do not explicitly reflect the identification, assessment, certification and validation of learning acquired in settings other than formal pathways. The economic crisis led to significant investment in training unemployed Cypriots and EU nationals to help them secure jobs at home or in another EU country, but an overarching framework of validation of non-formal and informal learning is not yet in place.

The board of ministers established an interdepartmental committee in 2013 to map existing validation practices throughout 2016 and 2017, with the aim of developing a national validation plan by 2018 and for implementation to begin by 2020 in line with the 2012 Council recommendation. The committee also considers work already done by HRDA, which has developed a system of vocational qualifications (SVQ) through which it is possible to validate non-formal and informal learning by the award of full or partial qualifications. It is planned to develop a further 80 vocational qualifications during the 2014-20 ESF programming period. The 72 vocational qualifications already developed will also be revised in response to labour market needs. The standards used in the vocational qualifications system relate not only to occupational skills but also soft skills developed through work experience (such as teamwork and collaboration); they are different from those used in apprenticeship or school-based VET qualifications and are not recognised in formal education. However, ways of linking the two VET systems are being considered as CYQF is developed.

The autonomous nature of higher education institutions enables them to accept credits from prior learning. The Cyprus Council for Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications also recognises work experience credits as part of an individual's qualification. Success in information and communication technology examinations is certificated regardless of where and when the knowledge was developed.

⁽²⁾ 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).

NQF implementation

The framework is not yet operational. The Cyprus NQF will be established by the Ministry of Education and Culture as an in-service department and will be implemented gradually. Stakeholders responsible for accreditation of qualifications will continue to work according to the existing legislative framework but new legislation is required for CYQF to clarify how stakeholders will work together. A decision of the council of ministers is expected and a new legislative framework will be introduced if required (Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). A new permanent body – council of the NQF of Cyprus – has been established, which includes all stakeholders; it is the consultative body for the CYQF referencing report. Its main tasks will be advisory and will focus on:

- (a) consulting with stakeholders on CYQF development and implementation;
- (b) developing, implementing and reviewing CYQF procedures;
- (c) disseminating public information on CYQF;
- (d) advising the Ministry of Education and Culture on policy and resource implications.

Quality assurance should underpin all levels of the NQF. A new Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) in higher education was established by law in March 2016. HRDA has a robust process of quality assurance in place for monitoring the SVQ. All aspects of the system, and those participating in it, are quality assured by HRDA, which holds the relevant registers of assessing centres and assessors for each vocational field and region. The HRDA has also introduced a system for evaluating and certifying training providers ⁽³⁾.

Referencing to the EQF

The Ministry of Education and Culture is the national body responsible for referencing national qualifications to the EQF. It is a work in progress. The draft referencing report was presented in June 2014 and presentation of the final referencing report is planned for the second half of 2016.

⁽³⁾ This system is entitled *Evaluation and certification of training providers (AxioPistoSyn)*:
http://www.hrdauth.org.cy/easyconsole.cfm/page/project/p_id/23/pc_id/17154

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the NQF and of a competence-based system of vocational qualifications, which will constitute an integral part of the NQF, is expected to strengthen the ties between VET for young people and vocational training for adults, and to improve their knowledge and skills. However, the comprehensive and inclusive nature of the new framework will require stakeholders to work together. The proposal to set up a council for the NQF is important for establishing a permanent forum for collaboration between stakeholders: the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, the Human Resource Development Authority and representatives of employer and employee organisations and the academic community.

The early stages of CYQF implementation will adopt a flexible, bottom-up approach, based on key principles to be applied across education and training subsystems, but accepting different approaches and practices where necessary. The focus is on a qualitative improvement of the system, enabling it to become flexible and adaptable while also ensuring unity, continuity and consistency between all levels and services. It should also link the education system, especially at tertiary level, with productivity and improvement of material infrastructure (Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015).

Further source of information

National contact point established at the Ministry of Education and Culture:
<http://www.moec.gov.cy> [URL accessed 14.11.2016]

Cypriot national qualifications framework (CYQF)

NQF levels	Educational/Academic qualifications		Professional/vocational qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree			8
7c	Master degree		SVQ Level 5	7
7b	Postgraduate diploma/Postgraduate certificate			
7a	Postgraduate certificate			
6	University degree (<i>Ptychion</i> /Bachelor degree)		SVQ Level 4	
5c	Higher certificates and diplomas (three years or more)		SVQ Level 3	5
5b	Post-secondary certificates and diplomas (two years)			
5a	Post-secondary certificates and diplomas (one year)			
4	Upper secondary general education and evening schools certificates (12th class or 12th and 13th class for some private schools)- <i>Apolyterion</i>	Upper secondary technical and vocational education and evening technical schools certificates (12th class)- <i>Apolyterion</i>	SVQ Level 2	4
3	Lower secondary education certificate (10th class)		New modern apprenticeship	3
2	Compulsory lower secondary education certificate (9th class)		Preparatory programme (new modern apprenticeship)	2
1	Compulsory education certificate (Elementary School leaving certificate, and/or graduates of 7th and/or 8th class)			1

Source: Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016.

List of abbreviations

CPC	Cyprus Productivity Centre
CYQF	Cyprus qualifications framework
EQF	European qualifications framework
HRDA	Human Resources and Development Agency
NQF	national qualifications framework
MIEEK	Metalykeiaka Instituta Epaggelmatikis Ekpaideysis kai Katartisis (post-secondary VET institutes)
QAAA	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency
SVQ	system of vocational qualifications
VET	vocational education and training

References

[Urls accessed 14.11.2016]

Council of the European Union (2012). Council decision of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 398, 22.12.2012, PP.1-5. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

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