

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

National developments on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The Czech Republic is well positioned at European level in relation to several education and training indicators. Educational achievements and employment of graduates are above average, while the rate of early school leavers is low (5.5% in 2014, compared to the EU average of 11.1%). Tertiary education achievement has progressed, but remains below EU average, and participation in early childhood education and care is not yet as widespread as in other EU countries (European Commission, 2015). The country's education policy strategy for 2015-20 – *Strategy 2020* – includes the priorities to reduce inequalities, to increase the quality of teaching, and to improve governance of the education system (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014).

Over the last decade there have been major developments in almost all the education system: decentralisation of governance and curriculum reform in the schools system, introduction of the three-cycle system in tertiary education, and development of the national qualifications system in further education. However, 'awareness of interconnectedness between various parts of the education system has gradually decreased' (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014, p. 5). The development of the education system in the direction of lifelong learning has become a priority and it is acknowledged that, for this to become a reality, there is a need to establish links between different educational pathways. The question is whether an overarching national qualifications framework (NQF) could help coordinate and bridge some of these separate developments.

The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) and a draft of the higher education framework have been developed. There are also descriptors for primary and secondary education but the country has yet to decide whether to develop a comprehensive NQF. Preliminary surveys among various stakeholders have been supportive of developing a comprehensive NQF as a tool for communication, cooperation and improving education and training quality. Promotion and development of a comprehensive NQF is in line with the national education *Strategy 2020*; however, the possibility of developing a comprehensive NQF is not mentioned explicitly.

The country referenced its national qualifications system to the EQF in 2011 (National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education, 2011). All qualifications

awarded in initial education and training and those included in the national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) are linked to the EQF levels.

Policy objectives

Interlinked development of a framework and a register of vocational qualifications was a cornerstone of the national *Strategy of lifelong learning* (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2007). The strategy's main elements reflect identified and agreed needs, and aim at improving access to lifelong learning ⁽¹⁾ and a more permeable education and training system, through:

- (a) creating a system to recognise and validate learning outcomes, irrespective of the way they were achieved;
- (b) making the whole system more transparent and understandable for all stakeholders, including learners and employers, employees, training providers;
- (c) linking initial and continuing education;
- (d) systematically involving all stakeholders in vocational education and training (VET) and in developing national qualifications;
- (e) responding to European initiatives such as making qualifications more transparent and supporting learner and worker mobility;
- (f) supporting disadvantaged groups and people with low qualification levels.

In 2015, the *Strategy of lifelong learning* expired. The main strategic documents currently in force in the country are the *Strategy for education policy until 2020*, the *Long-term policy objectives of education and development of the education system (2015-20)*, and the *Long-term objectives in higher education (2016-20)*. This last document refers to the introduction of the NQF for higher education and its self-certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area.

Developments in VET and higher education – to some extent pursued through projects – have not been coordinated or connected. This leaves several questions and challenges for developing shared concepts and designing a structure which could provide the basis for a future comprehensive NQF. This challenge is accentuated because the idea of a comprehensive framework is not yet well understood by the broader public.

⁽¹⁾ Important progress was achieved in adult participation in lifelong learning, from 6.8% in 2009 to 11.4% in 2011; however the trend has decreased to 9.3% in 2014, below the EU average (10.7%) (European Commission, 2015).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) ⁽²⁾ comprises eight levels and is currently populated with qualifications ranging between EQF levels 2 to 7. Qualification levels in the NSK are described in terms of competences. The level descriptors of the NSK were developed in close connection with the eight levels of the EQF (National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education, 2011) and they reflect the complexity of work activities ⁽³⁾. Each vocational qualification included in the NSK is described by a qualification standard (a list of expected learning outcomes) and an assessment standard (set of evaluation criteria). They are drafted by employers and are based on the descriptions of occupations in the national system of occupations.

The descriptors of the draft NQF for higher education cover three levels, corresponding to levels 6 to 8 of the EQF. They include academic qualifications (bachelor, master and doctoral degrees), but exclude tertiary vocational education (DiS) degrees. The architecture of the framework consists of two layers: the general (national) descriptors and the education (subject area) descriptors. Descriptors are divided into professional knowledge, professional skills and general competences. This division is compatible with the overarching framework for the European higher education area (EHEA) and also with EQF descriptors.

A set of level descriptors for primary and secondary education (EQF levels 1 to 4) was also drafted in 2012, based on core curricula. In this proposal, descriptors were grouped into three categories; knowledge, specific study and work skills, and transferable skills.

In 2013, a group of experts from education and working life drafted a proposal of national comprehensive descriptors, reflecting and respecting both the EQF descriptors and national sectoral descriptors developed so far. Discussion continues on the need, scope and goals of a comprehensive qualifications framework for all education sectors. Potential strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats, which were identified in previous surveys, are being discussed and shared among experts.

⁽²⁾ The qualifications in the NSK are not part of the formal education system. For more information on the NSK: <http://www.narodnikvalifikace.cz/en-us/>

⁽³⁾ In the proposal on qualifications levels in the national qualification system, adopted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in 2010, levels were linked to levels of education and types of programmes. During the referencing process it was decided that all qualifications awarded in formal education would be referenced to EQF levels by comparison of learning outcomes in national curricula and the EQF.

The learning outcomes ⁽⁴⁾ approach is widely used, although applied and interpreted slightly differently across education levels and subsystems. Core curricula for primary and secondary education emphasise key competences and their practical use. Expected learning outcomes are defined in terms of activities, practically aimed, usable in everyday life and verifiable (tasks that students should be able to perform). The Education Act ⁽⁵⁾, which came into force in 2005, regulates curriculum reform at primary and secondary levels, emphasising learning outcomes and strengthening social partner influence in VET. Key competences (such as information and communications technology skills, learning to learn, problem-solving) have become important. Modularisation of courses was introduced to improve transferability between various pathways in initial and continuous education, but schools have the autonomy to choose between standard or modular organisation of curricula. A competence-based and learning outcomes-oriented approach is shared by VET and higher education and has broad political support. This is documented and confirmed by curriculum reform in vocational education (including relevant methodologies) and by the Act on the verification and recognition of results of further education. Initial VET (IVET) core curricula are increasingly being aligned with competences defined in the NSK; the holistic character of the term 'competence' is emphasised. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are not seen as 'atomised' entities which can be judged in isolation from each other (Cedefop, 2016).

The learning outcomes approach was used, explored and defined in developing the national qualifications framework for higher education. Each study programme has a 'graduate profile' (goals of study) which is described in terms of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as knowledge, skills and competences that graduates should be able to demonstrate on completion of a specific learning phase (especially at the end of study). The Accreditation Commission recommends that higher education institutions structure learning outcomes in this way, and it is intended that, after testing and implementation, the framework will be used in the accreditation process (Cedefop, 2016).

⁽⁴⁾ Due to linguistic reasons and to the fact that terminology in the area of education and training is not unified in the Czech Republic, several terms are used with reference to learning outcomes. Ranging from 'learning/teaching outcomes' to 'outputs' to 'results of education', they are broadly compatible with the European definition and notion of learning outcomes. However, in some cases, several terms can be used to depict the same concept, or the same term can be understood differently by different stakeholders (Cedefop, 2016).

⁽⁵⁾ Act No 561/2004:
www.msmt.cz/uploads/VKav_200/Act_561_2011/edu_act_2011.doc

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The EQF national coordination point (EQF-NCP) has been functional since 2009 and is located within the National Institute for Education (NÚV). It comprises an NCP working group, an advisory group, and the National Council for Qualifications-EQF implementation working group. The NCP played an important role in referencing the Czech qualifications system to the EQF. It leads discussions on establishing a comprehensive NQF and provides and disseminates information on European tools.

The 2006 Act on the verification and recognition of further education results, which came into force in 2007 ⁽⁶⁾, sets out the basic responsibilities, powers and rights of all stakeholders in developing and awarding national vocational qualifications. The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) coordinates activities of central administrative authorities (ministries) and approves, modifies and issues a list of vocational and complete vocational qualifications. The National Council for Qualifications acts as an advisory body to the MEYS on qualifications. The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) is maintained and published by NÚV. Sector councils are in charge of developing qualification and assessment standards for qualifications up to level 7 included in the NSK; most qualifications are, however, placed at levels 2 to 5 ⁽⁷⁾. There are currently 29 sector councils consisting of representatives of employers, employees, qualification authorities and academic sectors.

One important change in the past 15 years has been a transfer of powers and responsibilities to the local level. Cooperation among central government, regional government, social partners (especially employers) and parents is important. Schools are responsible for setting and achieving their own goals, based on the national curriculum. However, key quality assurance mechanisms remain under the control of the Ministry of Education and the Czech School Inspectorate. In tertiary education, approval of programmes is given by the Ministry of Education, based on the reports of the Accreditation Commission for

⁽⁶⁾ Act No 179 of 30 March 2006 on verification and recognition of further education results and on amendments of some other acts: <http://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/further-education/the-act-on-the-recognition-of-further-education-results>

⁽⁷⁾ At higher levels, sector councils define only specialised supplementary qualifications, not those awarded by higher education institutions (bachelor, master and PhD degrees). Opening up higher levels (up to level 7) for qualifications awarded outside higher education institutions is seen as an important means of supporting lifelong learning.

Higher Education and the Accreditation Commission for Tertiary Vocational Education (National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education, 2011).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁸⁾

The Czech system of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is legally regulated by the Act on the verification and recognition of further education results (2006) ⁽⁹⁾, amended in 2012 ⁽¹⁰⁾. Validation and recognition procedures are in place for vocational qualifications included in the national register of vocational qualifications (NSK). The register addresses further learning results, with adults as a main target group, and it currently contains 1052 vocational qualifications in 29 different sectors, ranging between EQF/NQF levels 2 to 7.

The concept of ‘vocational qualification’ is the central principle of the Czech VNFIL system. Validation and recognition procedures are carried out according to the qualifications and assessment standards included in NSK. Each qualification standard – based on occupational standards – is defined in competences. Following validation and recognition permits acquiring a vocational qualification listed in the register. Certain vocational qualifications can be combined and, after a comprehensive final exam, can lead to a full VET qualification. At NSK/EQF level 3, for example, exams can be taken for all vocational qualifications of a given complete qualification, but to achieve a complete vocational qualification, attain a level of education and receive the apprenticeship certificate, it is necessary to pass a final exam. This makes final exams a bridge between the formal and the VNFIL systems.

Education and training providers in general education, vocational and higher education can decide to shorten a learner's pathway in line with legal provisions. This is normally at the school principal's discretion. There is no methodological

⁽⁸⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et. al. (forthcoming).

⁽⁹⁾ The Act on the verification and recognition of further education results (2006): <http://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/further-education/the-act-on-the-recognition-of-further-education-results>

⁽¹⁰⁾ Among the amendments: the term ‘partial qualification’ was replaced with ‘vocational qualification’; the minimum age limit for taking part in the competence assessment was removed; parts of a vocational qualification can be recognised when passing competence assessment for another vocational qualification.

framework for how this should be done and there is no record of how much it is used.

Access to formal education programmes requires a formal qualification; for instance, to access higher education, students have to have achieved an upper-secondary leaving certificate (*maturita*). However, higher education institutions can (but do not have to) select applicants based on their own entrance exams or results from national comparative exams.

NQF implementation

The Czech Republic does not have a comprehensive NQF in place and the main issue remains the integration of different subsystems into a single overarching framework. In 2011, the country referenced its formal qualifications directly to EQF levels, using the classification of educational qualifications types (KKOV) and nationally approved curricula. The process of evaluation of the referencing and the debate on the development of a comprehensive NQF continues. Currently the national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) functions as a framework for the system of VNFIL; there is also a draft of the qualifications framework for higher education.

The NSK is fully operational and currently contains 1052 vocational qualifications in 29 different sectors, all of them achievable through validation. It contains descriptors for eight levels, and qualification and assessment standards for each qualification. It is populated mostly with vocational qualifications at levels 2, 3 and 4, but a small number at levels 5, 6 and 7 have also been published. Since the implementation of the NSK 151 215 vocational qualifications have been awarded. The success rate is not measured but related data suggest that around 90% of candidates are successful. ⁽¹¹⁾

The qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna framework, was designed and developed in the Q-RAM project (2009-12). It provides general descriptors for three categories of learning outcomes for all higher education programmes, and specific descriptors for 39 areas of education. The Q-RAM framework covered EQF levels 5 to 8, where level 5 was foreseen to be assigned to short-cycle programmes once this category was introduced during higher education reform. Currently there is no a concept of short cycle. In 2012, the qualifications framework went through pilot implementation at 12 universities

⁽¹¹⁾ Data from September 2016, provided by the NSK (European Commission et. al., forthcoming).

and four tertiary VET institutions (VOŠ). In 2015, the framework was revised and discussed with the representation of higher education institutions. Its scope has been reduced to EQF levels 6 to 8 and it includes only qualifications provided by universities (not VOŠ, tertiary VET schools). There were plans to introduce the qualifications framework for higher education into national legislation, in the decree on standards for accreditation in higher education, prepared in response to the amendment to the Higher Education Act ⁽¹²⁾ effective since September 2016. However, those plans were not successful, hindering implementation and the self-certification process.

There is currently no link between the NSK and the qualifications framework for higher education: apart from the possibility to achieve vocational qualifications through validation, existing arrangements do not open up possibilities to access programmes through different pathways. Completion of compulsory education is generally a requirement to enter upper-secondary programmes. The *maturita* (upper-secondary leaving examination) is the requirement to enter higher education, although higher education institutions can additionally decide to use specific entry examinations.

EQF levels are indicated on the vocational qualifications included in the NSK, as well as on the Europass certificate supplement and diploma supplement. Starting from October 2017, it will be compulsory to indicate the EQF level on certain graduation certificates issued in formal education (lower secondary, upper secondary, tertiary vocational non-university schools, and conservatories).

Referencing to the EQF

The Czech Republic referenced its formal qualifications to EQF levels in December 2011. In the absence of a comprehensive NQF, formal initial qualifications were referenced based on the classification of educational qualifications types (KKOV) and nationally approved curricula. Of qualifications awarded in continuing education, only those included in the NSK were referenced to the EQF. Higher education qualifications are linked to the EQF, but not yet self-certified against the QF-EHEA.

⁽¹²⁾ The Higher Education Act is available at: <http://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/tertiary-education/the-higher-education-act?lang=2>

The amendment to the Higher Education Act can be found at:
<http://www.sbirka.cz/POSL4TYD/NOVE/16-137.htm>

Important lessons and future plans

The main topic of discussion remains development towards a comprehensive overarching NQF, with a coherent set of level descriptors. This could bring together subframeworks for vocational qualifications, higher education and lower and upper secondary education. Explicit levels and a single set of descriptors would make links to EQF levels more transparent. Discussions on the purpose and potential advantages of the NQF have started along with work by experts, but reaching political agreement among stakeholders is a challenge and no decision has yet been taken.

In 2015 a working group was established by the Ministry of Education to implement the EQF. The group brings together representatives from all sections of the ministry, from the Czech School Inspectorate and as from organisations directly controlled by the ministry: the National Institute for Education and National Institute for Further Education. One of the tasks is to develop one comprehensive NQF as a tool to improve the orientation and coordination of the education system and enable clarity of Czech qualifications for domestic and foreign citizens ⁽¹³⁾.

Successful implementation of learning outcomes requires coordination of subsystems, initiatives, measures and bodies, which is sometimes difficult. Better understanding of the approach, better cooperation, communication and coordination are prerequisites for future implementation of the learning outcomes approach. One line of progress since 2009 is the development of informal networks of experts, teachers, researchers, policy makers and officials willing to discuss and share their experiences. All interviewees contacted for a recent Cedefop study on learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016) expressed the need for better understanding of the learning outcomes concept among different sectors and a desire for better coordination of education policies. The 2012 PISA results were slightly better than those from 2009 and one reason for this could be a stronger curricular focus on learning outcomes in the key competence area.

⁽¹³⁾ The main source for further thinking and discussion is the study: Nantl, J. (2014). *Czech qualifications framework: the possibilities, conditions and context of formation of a national framework of qualifications for the Czech Republic*. http://www.nuv.cz/uploads/EQF/2_1_CZQF_study_fin.pdf

Further source of information

National Institute for Education (EQF NCP): <http://www.nuv.cz/>

National register of vocational qualifications (NSK):

<http://www.narodnikvalifikace.cz/en-us/>

[URLs accessed 10.10.2016].

Czech national qualifications framework (NSK)

EQF levels	Czech qualifications levels (*)	NSK levels
8	Doctoral programme PhD, ThD degrees three to four years beyond master (<i>doktor</i>)	8
7	Master programme Mgr., MgA., Ing., Ing. arch., MUDr, MDDr, MVDr, JUDr, PhDr, RNDr, PharmDr, ThLic., and ThDr degrees two to three years of tertiary education beyond bachelor or four to six years of tertiary education (<i>magistr, inženýr, doktor</i>)	7 e.g. Senior detective (<i>vedoucí detektiv</i>) Chemical engineer product manager (<i>inženýr chemie produktmanažer</i>)
6	Bachelor programme Bc and BcA degrees three to four years of tertiary education (<i>bakalář</i>) Tertiary vocational education DiS. degree three to three-and-a-half years of tertiary education (<i>diplomovaný specialista</i>)	6 e.g. Career counsellor for educational and professional path (<i>kariérový poradce pro vzdělávací a profesní dráhu</i>) Independent research and development electrician (<i>samostatný elektrotechnik výzkumný a vývojový pracovník</i>)
5		5 e.g. Tour guide (<i>průvodce cestovního ruchu</i>) Agricultural advisor for plant production (<i>zemědělský poradce pro ochranu rostlin</i>)
4	Upper secondary education with <i>maturita</i> exam General education (Gymnazium) – four years of upper secondary study Upper secondary education with <i>maturita</i> exam Vocational education – four years of upper secondary study	4 e.g. <i>Technik řízení jakosti ve strojírenství</i> (quality management specialist in engineering) Detective trainee (<i>detektiv koncipient</i>)

EQF levels	Czech qualifications levels (*)	NSK levels
	Supplementary study leading to a <i>maturita</i> exam Two years of study after the apprenticeship certificate	
3	Upper secondary education with apprenticeship certificate Vocational education – three years of upper secondary study	3 e.g. Glassmaker for pressed glass (<i>sklář lisovaného skla</i>) Locksmith (<i>zámkař</i>)
2	Lower secondary education Completion of a lower secondary general education programme – nine years	2 e.g. Production of side dishes (<i>výroba příloh</i>) Guard (<i>strážný</i>)
1	Special education Completion of an educational programme in a special school – 10 years	1

(*) In absence of a comprehensive NQF, the Czech Republic has referenced its formal initial qualifications directly to the EQF

Source: Adapted from the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education, 2011.

List of abbreviations

EHEA	European higher education area
EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
KKOV	classification of educational qualification types
NCP	national coordination point
NSK	national register of vocational qualifications
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVQ	national vocational qualifications
SWOT	strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
VET	vocational education and training

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[URLs accessed 11.10.2016]

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