

FRANCE

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The setting up, in 2002, of the National committee on vocational qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* (CNCP)) and the National register of vocational qualifications (*Repertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (RNCP)) signalled the establishment of the French national qualifications framework (NQF). Supported by the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'experience*), the French framework can be seen as belonging to the first generation of European qualifications frameworks. While not including general education (primary and secondary education as well as the upper secondary Baccalaureate), more than 10 000 qualifications (including in higher education) are currently covered by the framework ⁽¹⁾.

Some stakeholders consider the existing five-level structure (dating back to 1969) to be in need of replacement. Apart from the need to align the level descriptors to those now commonly used across Europe, qualifications and certificates below EQF-level 3 are currently not included. A proposal for a seven-level structure exists (following the work of a national committee set up in 2012), but it is not clear if and when this will be adopted. The proposed seven-level structure distinguishes between three main groups or domains of learning outcomes; skills, autonomy/responsibility, and knowledge.

The framework, which is operational, was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in October 2010. The EQF levels, and their alignment with the five-level structure, are clearly indicated in databases as well as in certificate and diploma supplements.

⁽¹⁾ At the start of 2016, CNCP included a total of 12 589 qualifications. A main distinction is made between qualifications awarded by public authorities and referring to national law (Ministries of National Education and Higher Education, Agriculture, etc.) and qualifications awarded by training providers, chambers and social partners. In the first category we find 8 295 qualifications, in the second 4 294.

Policy objectives

The French NQF, as defined by the RNCP, covers all vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications, including all higher education qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose. The framework covers three main types of qualification:

- (a) those awarded by French ministries (in cooperation with the social partners through a consultative vocational committee (*Commission professionnelle consultative, CPC*));
- (b) those awarded by training providers, chambers and ministries but where no consultative committee is in place;
- (c) those set up and awarded by social partners under their own responsibility.

The French NQF has more limited scope than most comprehensive NQFs now operating across Europe. Qualifications from general education, notably primary education and general upper secondary qualifications (the general baccalaureate) are not included. Recent policy initiatives and reforms have emphasised the need to give high priority to employability and equip candidates with competences better aligned with the needs of the labour market. Education and training providers at all levels (including universities) have been obliged to reformulate and clarify their qualifications, also in terms of labour market relevance. The proposal for revision of the level-structure and its descriptors (2016) strengthens this labour market and competence focus (see below).

The French NQF operates with less clear distinction between VET and higher education than many other European countries. This signals a wish to promote vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications at all levels. Since the 1970s, vocational courses and programmes have been an important and integrated part of traditional universities; professional bachelor and master degrees are common. Outside universities we find specialist technical and vocational schools offering high level courses and certificates. These schools are run by different ministries covering their respective subject areas (such as agriculture, health), or by chambers of commerce and industry. *Ingénieurs* from these institutions or students in business schools hold qualifications at a high level, equivalent to those from universities with a master degree. The Ministry of Higher Education delivers the bachelor and master degrees and recognises the diplomas. This has an integrating effect on the diplomas awarded by other ministries such as culture or industry.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The original five-level structure introduced in 1969 was used as the basis for referencing the French framework to the EQF in 2010. Given that the French qualification system has developed considerably since 1969, a number of stakeholders have pointed to the need for an updated level structure. In 2012 a working group of representatives of the committee on national qualifications (CNCP) and stakeholders submitted a report on the possible introduction of an eight-level structure, distinguishing between knowledge, skills and competence. This proposal was not followed up politically and a new committee has recently (2016) proposed a seven-level structure referring to skills, autonomy/responsibility and knowledge as main learning outcomes categories/domains. Revision of the level structure and accompanying descriptors is considered politically sensitive: existing levels are used as reference points for salary agreements and a change could influence these. There is also some scepticism towards an extension of the framework to include certificates at lower levels (equivalent to EQF 1 and 2). This latter question is also linked to labour agreements, such as negotiations on minimum wages.

Although it is likely that a seven or eight-level structure can be introduced at some stage (based on technical work carried out so far), it is not clear when this could happen. A particular issue is how the new structure will link to occupational standards, particularly the national register of occupations in the labour market (*Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois* (ROME)) and the international standard classification of occupations (ISCO).

Levels in the French national qualifications framework

Level	Level definition	Learning outcomes
V	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational studies certificate (BEP) or the certificate of vocational ability (CAP), and by assimilation, the level 1 certificate of vocational training for adults (CFPA).	This level corresponds to full qualification for carrying out a specific activity with the ability to use the corresponding instruments and techniques. This activity mainly concerns execution work, which can be autonomous within the limits of the techniques involved.
IV	Personnel holding jobs at a supervisory highly skilled worker level and able to provide proof of a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational certificate (BP), technical certificate (BT), vocational baccalaureate or technological baccalaureate.	A level 4 qualification involves a higher level of theoretical knowledge than the previous level. This activity concerns mainly technical work that can be executed autonomously and/or involve supervisory and coordination responsibilities.

Level	Level definition	Learning outcomes
III	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of a diploma from a university institute of technology (DUT) or a technology certificate (BTS) or a certificate corresponding to the end of the first higher education cycle.	A level 3 qualification corresponds to higher levels of knowledge and abilities, but without involving mastery of the fundamental scientific principles for the fields concerned. The knowledge and abilities required enable the person concerned to assume, autonomously or independently, responsibilities in design and/or supervision and/or management.
II	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training comparable to that of a bachelor or master degree.	At this level, exercise of a salaried or independent vocational activity involves mastery of the fundamental scientific principles for the profession, generally leading to autonomy in exercising that activity.
I	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training above that of a master degree.	As well as confirmed knowledge of the fundamental scientific principles for a vocational activity, a level 1 qualification requires mastery of design or research processes.

Source: French National Statistics Commission (1969). *Nomenclature des niveaux de formation: approuvée par décision du groupe permanent de la formation professionnelle et de la promotion sociale, le 21 mars 1969*. <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/grand-public/explorerBaseDocumentaire?dossier=64> [accessed 30.1.2017].

While the level structure and its descriptors can be considered as dated, the definition, writing and assessment of qualifications follows clearly defined national requirements. The approach was strengthened by the 2002 law on validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE)) and its emphasis on learning outcomes as the basis for awarding any kind of certified qualification.

Emphasis has recently been given to implementing the learning outcomes approach in higher education. The law of August 2009 (*Loi sur les responsabilités et libertés des universités*) creates the obligation for universities to set new services dedicated to employability. This law requires universities to improve their learning outcomes descriptions, both for employers and students. The learning outcomes descriptions form the basis on which all qualifications are approved by the CNCP. This is illustrated by the criteria ⁽²⁾ for writing learning outcomes for bachelor level (licences) which are divided into the following main areas:

- (a) common generic competence;
- (b) pre-professional competences;
- (c) transferable competences;
- (d) specific competences related to broad, disciplinary subject areas.

⁽²⁾ Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, 16 July 2012.

Revision of the learning outcomes of bachelor and master degrees is being carried out in 2016. The aim is to reduce the number of national qualifications (to approximately 1000 and 300 respectively for bachelor and master) and to ensure stronger national consistency between the different titles.

Initial vocational qualifications are defined according to the same logic as for higher education qualifications, in terms of skills, knowledge and competences. There are different forms of VET provision though, influencing the way learning outcomes are assessed, following four main approaches:

- (a) qualifications based on training modules, each module assessed or validated separately ⁽³⁾;
- (b) qualifications based on a two-block approach, theory and practical experience, the learning outcomes of the two blocks being assessed separately;
- (c) qualifications linked to a single, coherent block of learning outcomes/competences requiring a holistic approach to assessment of learning outcomes;
- (d) qualifications based on units of learning outcomes, which can be assessed separately, and capitalised independent of any kind of learning process.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

Belonging to the first generation of European frameworks, the French NQF is fully implemented and operational. It is a regulatory framework playing a key role in the overall governance of education and training systems, particularly for vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications. While emphasising the importance of transparency (for example by integrating the Europass tools), the framework directly influences access and progression in the system as well as funding and quality assurance issues. The number of qualifications covered by the CNCP has been steadily increasing in recent years. A significant part of this growth was caused by vocationally and professionally oriented higher education qualifications, mainly at EQF levels 5 and 6.

The CNCP is a platform for cooperation between all ministries involved in design and award of qualifications (ministries of education, higher education, labour, social affairs, agriculture, culture, youth and sports, defence, finance) and for the social partners and other stakeholders (such as chambers) involved in

⁽³⁾ A French qualification can be divided into modules, or '*blocs de competences*', if deemed relevant by the awarding body.

coordinating the qualifications system and framework. This broad involvement is seen as necessary (both for technical and administrative reasons) to capture the diversity of qualifications in France and also for reasons of credibility and ownership. CNCP is entitled to be informed about vocational qualifications created by social partners, even in cases where there is no intention to enter them in the national register.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁴⁾

The French VAE system allows the award of whole or parts of qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose (*finalité professionnelle*) at all levels, without the need to go through formal training. Qualifications obtained through VAE are the same as those awarded via initial or continuous formal training or apprenticeship. VAE includes, by definition, the stages of identification, documentation, assessment and certification. Development of VAE was simultaneous to restructuring the certification system in France; with the introduction of RNCP, any qualification to be obtained via VAE must be registered in the RNCP. VAE has developed from a national perspective, strongly articulated to lifelong learning, training and employment policies. It is now integrated in the Labour and education code. Since 2013, looking at qualifications awarded by ministries, more than 307 000 full qualifications have been awarded through VAE, and today, about 1 300 qualifications are accessible through VAE.

In comparison with systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning in other European countries, the French VAE system is very well developed. However, efforts to broaden access, diversify candidate profiles, shorten the length of the process and encourage its use across a wider range of qualifications are still required for further development of the system. VAE is demanding, especially for candidates with low skills and low levels of qualifications, although surveys show that these candidates recognise that a diploma cannot be awarded as a single certificate; it still poses important challenges to training providers responsible for its implementation. Barriers and difficulties are well identified by public authorities, as in reports published by the general inspectorates. Recent revisions of the legislative framework (Law of 5

⁽⁴⁾ 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).

March 2014) introduced important changes which are expected to have a positive impact on the take-up of VAE. It should provide better support to candidates, smooth procedures, improve coordination between stakeholders, and improve data monitoring.

NQF implementation

The role of the CNCP as the ‘gatekeeper’ of the French framework is important. No qualification can be included in the official register without the approval of the CNCP. For a qualification to be registered in the RNCP, several requirements have to be met; these aim for national coherence and strengthening the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. All qualifications registered in the RNCP must be possible to acquire through validation of non-formal and informal learning. Registration signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the CNCP, underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary for:

- (a) receiving funding;
- (b) financing validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (c) exercising certain professions and occupations;
- (d) entering apprenticeship schemes.

The strength of the CNCP lies in its openness to public and private providers and awarding institutions. The procedures and criteria developed and applied for this purpose may be of interest to countries currently implementing new (and open) NQFs. Any institution (public or private) wanting to register a qualification must respond to the following main issues:

- (a) legal basis of the body (or network of bodies) awarding the qualification;
- (b) indication of procedures if the awarding institution discontinues its activity;
- (c) description of tasks addressed by the qualification;
- (d) link to ROME (register of occupations in the French labour market);
- (e) competences (learning outcomes) related to these tasks;
- (f) competences (learning outcomes) to be assessed;
- (g) mode of assessment;
- (h) relationship to existing qualifications in France and abroad;
- (i) composition of the assessment jury;
- (j) link to validation.

French experiences since 2002 illustrate the need for NQFs to evolve continuously to stay relevant. The lack of progress in introducing a new level

structure is hindering framework development into a comprehensive NQF along the lines followed by other European countries. The CNCP has broadened coverage of its work by developing an inventory of certificates not having been attributed levels in the national framework ⁽⁵⁾. While there can be many reasons for a qualification not to be included in the RNCP, the inventory makes it possible to give an overview of all labour market relevant certificates, not only those with a RNCP level.

Referencing to the EQF

A referencing report (CNCP, 2010) was presented to the EQF advisory group in October 2010. From the start the process involved all ministries, social partners and other stakeholders (represented in the CNCP).

The lack of low level vocational/professional qualifications has posed a particular challenge. Members of the EQF advisory group argued that the absence of lower level qualifications in the French framework (in a worst case scenario) could prevent migrants holding qualifications at EQF level 1 or 2 from entering the French labour market, given lack of equivalents in the French system. There is now national debate on this issue.

The timing for the presentation of an updated referencing report to the EQF advisory group is uncertain and will depend on the revision of the level-structure and possibly on clarification of how to deal with the lower levels of vocational/professional qualifications.

Further information:

EQF national coordination point for France: the National committee on vocational qualifications (CNCP): <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr> [accessed 27.1.2017].

⁽⁵⁾ <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/actualites/inventaire-dernieres-certifications-recensees-et-prochaines-echeances-0>

French national qualifications framework (NQF/RNCP)

French nomenclature	Qualifications types	EQF levels
I-Doctorat	Doctoral programmes (<i>Doctorats</i>)	8
I-Master	Master degrees (Masters) Degrees in engineering (<i>titre d'ingénieur</i>) (titles at level I)	7
II-Grade de Licence	Bachelor programmes (Licences) Vocational bachelors (<i>Licence professionnelle</i>) (titles at level II)	6
III	Undergraduate technician certificates (<i>Brevet de technicien supérieur</i>) (BTS) Undergraduate technician certificates in agriculture (<i>Brevet de technicien supérieur agricole</i>) (BTSA) Undergraduate certificates in technology (<i>Diplôme universitaire de technologie</i>) (DUT) Master qualifications (Brevets de maîtrise) issued by the Chambers of Trade (Chambre des métiers)	5
IV	Vocational baccalaureates (<i>Baccalauréat professionnel</i>) Technological baccalaureates (<i>Baccalauréat technologique</i>) Professional certificates (<i>Brevet professionnel</i>) Applied arts certificates (<i>Brevet des métiers d'art</i>) Technician certificates (<i>Brevet de technicien</i>)	4
V	Secondary vocational certificates (<i>Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle</i>) (CAP), <i>Brevet d'études professionnelles</i> (BEP)) Secondary vocational certificates in agriculture (<i>Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle agricole</i>) (CAPA) <i>Brevet d'études professionnelles agricoles</i> (BEPA))	3
	No French qualifications and certificates at these levels	1 and 2

Source: EQF, French national contact point.

List of abbreviations

CNCP	Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle [National committee on vocational qualifications]
CNIS	<i>Conseil national de l'information statistique</i> [National council of statistics]
CPC	<i>Commission professionnelle consultative</i> [Consultative vocational committee]
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
RNCP	<i>registre national de la certification professionnelle</i> [national register of vocational qualifications]
ROME	<i>répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois</i> [register of occupations in the French labour market]
VAE	<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> [validation of non-formal and informal learning]

References

[URLs accessed 7.1.2017]

CIEP (2014). *The use or potential use of QFs by HEIs and other stakeholders linked to mobility*. Sèvres: CIEP.

http://www.ciep.fr/sources/expert_educ/reconnaissance-des-diplomes/Final-Report-QFs-UHSE/index.html

CNCP (2010). Referencing of *the national framework of French certification in the light of the European framework of certification for lifelong learning*.

<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-efq/files/Report-FR-NQF-EQF-VF.pdf>

CNIS (1969). *Nomenclature des niveaux de formation: approuvée par décision du groupe permanent de la formation professionnelle et de la promotion sociale [training levels approved by decision of the standing group of vocational training and social promotion]*. <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/grand-public/explorerBaseDocumentaire?dossier=64>

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

Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (2012). *Référentiels de compétences en licence [detailed criteria for writing learning outcomes for bachelor level]*. http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/Plan_licence/61/4/referentiel_227614.pdf