

FRANCE

European inventory on NQF 2018

Introduction and context

Participation in education and training in France is above EU averages and EU targets, with universal early childhood education and care, a declining percentage of students who leave education early (8.9% in 2017), and relatively high rates of tertiary education attainment and adult participation in lifelong learning (44.3% and 18.7%, respectively, in 2017). However, the percentage of 15-year-olds who underperform in reading, maths and science is slightly above the EU average. The basic skills of pupils in primary education are also low. Gaps in performance and the type of secondary school-leaving qualification obtained are strongly correlated with socioeconomic background. Recent initiatives aim to reduce inequalities and improve basic skills by lowering the starting age of compulsory education from six to three (from September 2019), reducing class sizes, and improving teacher competences to deliver differentiated teaching. Upper secondary and tertiary education reforms are subject to wide consultation and approached in a coordinated manner. The general and technological *baccalauréat* (upper secondary school-leaving examination) ⁽¹⁾ is being revised (to be in place by 2021), including a more flexible curriculum and increased guidance to prepare students better for higher education or the labour market. A new higher education law ⁽²⁾ was adopted in 2018, aiming to increase the completion rate at bachelor level (*licence*) through educational support, more flexible programmes and new teaching methods. Employment rates of vocational education and training (VET) graduates have started to increase; 48% of recent graduates from school-based VET and 69% from work-based VET found a job in 2017. A major reform of VET and apprenticeships was initiated in 2017 and continues. A new national skills agency, France Compétences, was set up in 2018, aiming to simplify funding mechanisms and governance of continuing VET

⁽¹⁾ Besides the general and technological *baccalauréat* which are being revised, there is also a third type of upper secondary school-leaving examination: the professional/vocational *baccalauréat*.

⁽²⁾ Law 2018-166 of 8 March 2018 on student orientation and success [*Loi n° 2018-166 du 8 mars 2018 relative à l'orientation et à la réussite des étudiants*].
JORF, No 0057, 9.3.2018.
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2018/3/8/ESRX1730554L/jo/texte>

(CVET) and apprenticeships. Readjustment in the joint management of VET by the State, the regions and social partners is also part of the reform, with the regions taking on more responsibility in guidance and less in steering of apprenticeships (European Commission, 2018).

The French national qualifications framework (NQF) can be seen as belonging to the first generation of European qualifications frameworks. Its establishment was signalled by the setting up, in 2002, of the National register of vocational and professional qualifications (*Repertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (RNCP)), now considered as the technical support of the framework, and the National commission for vocational and professional qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* (CNCP)), the body responsible for managing and updating the RNCP until 2018 ⁽³⁾. The NQF is linked to the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE) and supported by a competence orientation in designing curricula covering the entire vocational system. The structure that was in use up to 2019 was underpinned by a classification of training levels developed back in 1969 as part of a systematic public planning policy which gradually aligned the structure of the nationally recognised qualifications (*diplômes*) to that of occupations and jobs on the labour market (Paddeu et al., 2018). It covered vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications, including those from higher education, while excluding secondary general education qualifications.

As the French qualification system has developed considerably ⁽⁴⁾ over recent decades, and more closely aligned the NQF to the European qualifications framework (EQF), different proposals to revise the five level structure (in use until 2019) were put forward. Revision has been a lengthy process, as qualification levels were linked to wider collective bargaining agreements in the country. The 2018 law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ⁽⁵⁾ and subsequent

⁽³⁾ Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation [*Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale*]. *JORF*, 18.1.2002, p. 1008.
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

⁽⁴⁾ One important trend witnessed over the last 40 years is diversification of the nationally recognised qualifications and an increase in requests for registering of qualifications by private providers.

⁽⁵⁾ Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future [*Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*].
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

legislation ⁽⁶⁾ strengthened the legal basis of the NQF and defined a new eight-level structure and level descriptors in three categories, similar to those of the EQF: complexity of knowledge, skills and know-how, and degree of responsibility and autonomy.

The five-level structure in use until 2019 was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in October 2010.

Policy objectives

The French NQF covers four main types of vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications (Paddeu et al., 2018):

- (a) diplomas and degrees ⁽⁷⁾ issued on behalf of the state, legislated by French ministries and created on recommendation and in cooperation with tripartite consultative vocational committees (*Commissions professionnelle consultative*, CPCs ⁽⁸⁾);
- (b) qualifications issued on behalf of the state but where no consultative committee is in place ⁽⁹⁾;
- (c) qualifications awarded by public or private bodies in their own name, such as higher education institutions, chambers, and private education providers;
- (d) sector-specific or industry-level qualifications (*certificats de qualification professionnelle*, CQP).

Qualifications from general education (including the general *baccalauréat*) ⁽¹⁰⁾ were not included in the RNCP. There is also a less clear distinction between VET and higher education compared to many other European countries. Higher education qualifications are considered to be

⁽⁶⁾ Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational qualifications [*Décret n° 2019-14 du 8 janvier 2019 relatif au cadre national des certifications professionnelles*]. *JORF*, No 0007, 9.1.2019.

https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=6A9D2FCF7FB127AC6021BD782B475904.tplgfr34s_2?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037964754&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id&idJO=JORFCONT000037964593

⁽⁷⁾ These are secondary and higher education qualifications and continuing training qualifications issued by the Ministry of labour.

⁽⁸⁾ CPCs are advisory bodies involving representatives of employers, employees, local authorities and professionals.

⁽⁹⁾ For example, qualifications awarded by the Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Culture are not developed through, and following recommendation from, advisory bodies.

⁽¹⁰⁾ While not included in the RNCP, the general *baccalauréat* was placed at level IV in the classification of training levels.

qualifications with a vocational/professional purpose ⁽¹¹⁾ and therefore included in the framework (Paddeu et al., 2018), signalling an orientation promoting vocationally and professionally-oriented qualifications at all levels ⁽¹²⁾.

The initial aim of implementing a classification of vocational and professional qualifications ⁽¹³⁾ in France between 1972 and 2002 was to promote social justice, reaching parity of esteem of qualifications awarded as a result of adult training with educational qualifications through levelling. Policy objectives started to shift in the 1990s towards combating unemployment. The goal of accreditation was no longer recognising the duration of training programmes, but their learning outcomes, with a focus on assessment of competences (Paddeu et al., 2018).

Since its introduction in 2002, the RNCP has had an important role in quality assurance of qualifications and promotion of lifelong learning with a view to the integration of people into the labour market (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). The RNCP aims to ensure quality and transparency of vocational and professional qualifications through a publicly accessible register of qualifications formally recognised by the State and social partners. It is a single reference tool for all stakeholders concerned with occupations and training within the country and internationally, enabling the identification of qualifications 'for vocational and professional purposes' and aiding understanding of the French qualifications landscape. The 2002 law on social modernisation that established the RNCP introduced a logic centred on competences that progressively replaced that centred on knowledge (CNCP, 2010). In addition, the French framework directly

⁽¹¹⁾ In France, the concept of 'vocational qualification' refers to a qualification 'that results from a qualification process and that therefore brings with it some kind of recognition in the labour market and, to some degree, ensures access to it' (Paddeu et al., 2018). This is also sometimes referred to as a 'full qualification' (*qualification complète*).

⁽¹²⁾ 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, specialist technical and vocational schools, run by different ministries, by chambers of commerce and industry or by private providers, offer high level courses and certificates. *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, which has an integrating effect on the diplomas awarded by other ministries such as Culture or Industry.

⁽¹³⁾ The development of this classification was closely related to labour market needs and a need for a statistical tool to measure the shares of the population to be enrolled at different levels of education. The hierarchy of *diplômes* was used as a starting point for the classification, as it had more stable definitions. It was then transposed into training levels linked to corresponding occupations and jobs, facilitating statistical analysis (Paddeu et al., 2018).

influences access and progression in the education and training system and in the labour market, as well as funding and quality assurance ⁽¹⁴⁾. The levels of education and training, which became the levels of the NQF, were linked in many cases to agreed wage rates. Despite a diversification of recognised qualifications since the 1970s, the French state is the only entity responsible for quality assurance (Paddeu et al., 2018).

Recent policy initiatives and reforms continued to emphasise 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 2018 law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ⁽¹⁵⁾, which aims to transform the vocational training and apprenticeship system in France, including its governance and financing, establishes the NQF on an eight-level structure and redefines the general principles for vocational and professional qualifications, for their levelling, and inclusion in the RNCP. The revision of the level structure and its descriptors reflects this labour market and competence focus.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The classification of training levels introduced in 1969 was used as the basis for referencing the French framework to the EQF in 2010. The five-level structure, with level V being the lowest and level I the highest, was referenced to EQF levels 3 to 8, with no French qualifications at EQF levels 1 and 2. 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. Revision of the level structure and accompanying descriptors was a lengthy process and considered politically sensitive; existing levels are used as reference points for salary agreements and changes could influence these. There was also some

⁽¹⁴⁾ Stephanie Allais argues that 'the French framework, where labour markets were the most regulated and collective bargaining had the widest reach, had the clearest relationships between qualifications and work. However, the qualifications framework did not seem to be the cause, but rather the effect of such relationships' (Allais, 2017).

⁽¹⁵⁾ Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future [*Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

scepticism towards an extension of the framework to include certificates at lower levels (equivalent to EQF 1 and 2), also linked to labour agreements, such as negotiations on minimum wages.

A new eight-level structure was recently adopted through Decree no. 14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications ⁽¹⁶⁾, more closely aligned to the EQF. Levels are defined using learning outcomes in three categories:

- (a) complexity of knowledge associated with carrying out the corresponding professional activity;
- (b) level of skills and know-how;
- (c) level of responsibility and autonomy.

The first level of the new framework covers basic competences resulting from an agreement between social partners and the government; it is not linked to qualifications included in the RNCP. The newly introduced level 2 covers simple activities and limited autonomy. Levels 3 to 8 cover qualifications previously included at the five levels of the RNCP. The previous level I was dissociated into the new levels 7 and 8, distinguishing between master and doctoral qualifications ⁽¹⁷⁾. According to the 2019 decree on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications, reclassification of level I qualifications to the new levels 7 and 8 should be completed by January 2020.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications [*Décret n° 2019-14 du 8 janvier 2019 relatif au cadre national des certifications professionnelles*]. *JORF*, No 0007, 9.1.2019.
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=6A9D2FCF7FB127AC6021BD782B475904.tplgfr34s_2?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037964754&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id&idJO=JORFCONT000037964593

⁽¹⁷⁾ Ministry of higher education, research and innovation (2019). Law of 5 September 2018 on the freedom to choose one's professional future: main provisions in terms of certification [*Loi du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel: principales dispositions en matière de certification*]. Presentation in the EQF AG, 5 February 2019, Brussels.

Level descriptors in the French national qualifications framework

Levels	Level descriptors
8	Level 8 attests the ability to identify and solve complex and new problems involving a variety of fields, using the most advanced knowledge, skills and know-how, to design and pilot research and innovation projects and processes. The national doctoral degree is classified at this level of the national framework
7	Level 7 attests the ability to develop and implement alternative strategies for carrying out the professional activity in complex professional contexts, as well as to assess the risks and consequences of one's activity. Master degrees are classified at this level of the national framework.
6	Level 6 attests the ability to analyse and solve unforeseen complex problems in a specific field, to formalise skills and know-how and methods and to build upon them. Bachelor degrees (<i>licence</i>) are classified at this level of the national framework.
5	Level 5 attests the ability to master skills and know-how in a field of activity, to develop solutions to new problems, to analyse and interpret information using concepts, to transmit skills, know-how and methods.
4	Level 4 attests the ability to carry out activities that require using a wide range of aptitudes, adapting existing solutions to solve specific problems, organising one's work autonomously in generally predictable but potentially changing contexts, and to participate in the evaluation of activities. The national Baccaalaureate diploma is classified at this level of the national framework.
3	Level 3 attests the ability to carry out activities and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information in a known context, as well as the ability to adapt the means of execution and one's behaviour to the circumstances.
2	Level 2 attests the ability to carry out simple activities and solve common problems using simple rules and tools by using vocational skills and know-how in a structured context. The associated vocational/professional activity is carried out with a limited level of autonomy.
1	Level 1 of the national framework for vocational and professional qualifications corresponds to the mastery of basic knowledge.

Source: Decree No 14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications [unofficial translation].

The notion of competence was introduced in French VET in the 1970s and in general education in the 1980s. It is now explicitly referred to in curriculum documents in all sub-systems of education and training (Cedefop, 2016). The learning outcomes approach was strengthened by the 2002 Law on social modernisation and subsequent decrees that set up the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE), and its emphasis on validation and certification of competences, based on learning outcomes, for awarding any kind of qualification. The learning outcomes

descriptions form the basis on which all qualifications are approved for registration into the RNCP.

Initial vocational qualifications are defined in terms of skills, knowledge and competences, but different forms of VET provision differ in how learning outcomes are assessed. In higher education, the law of August 2007 on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities ⁽¹⁸⁾ created the obligation for universities to set new services dedicated to employability, requiring them to improve their learning outcomes descriptions, both for employers and students. Revision of the learning outcomes of bachelor and master degrees was carried out in 2016 with the aim of reducing the number of national qualifications and ensuring stronger national consistency between the different titles. The main learning outcomes for doctorate degrees have been published in the RNCP.

The notion of ‘units/blocks of competences’ (*blocs de compétences*) was introduced in 2014 ⁽¹⁹⁾, as an organisation of competences in qualification standards following the logic of socially meaningful activities. A unit/block of competences is an ‘identified part of a vocational qualification’, defined as a ‘homogeneous and coherent set of competences contributing to carrying out a professional activity autonomously, and which can be assessed and validated’ (Labour Code, art. L6113-1).

From 2019, qualification awarding bodies who want to register their qualifications in the RNCP have to provide a presentation of the units/blocks of competences corresponding to the different parts of qualifications. The value of having qualifications divided into units/blocks of competences corresponding to typical activities is to increase flexibility of qualification pathways, and to support mobility and progression, either through training or validation (VAE), by supporting modularisation of training provision (European Commission et al., forthcoming). The new commission within France Compétences that replaces the CNCP may also make it mandatory for qualification providers to share the units/blocks of competences to facilitate lifelong learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

⁽¹⁸⁾ Law No 2007-1199 of 10 August 2007 on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities [*Loi n° 2007-1199 du 10 août 2007 relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000824315>

⁽¹⁹⁾ Law 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy [*Loi No 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale*]. *JORF*, No 0055, 6.3.2014, p. 4848.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2014/3/5/ET SX1400015L/jo/texte>

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The National register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP) was introduced in 2002 through the law on social modernisation ⁽²⁰⁾, along with the National commission for vocational and professional qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* - CNCP), responsible for supervising the system of vocational qualifications and for managing the register. The CNCP carried on the work of the previous Technical Commission for the Accreditation of Diplomas and Certificates (*Commission Technique d'Homologation*, CTH), with the mission to:

- (a) ensure the coherence of, and promote pathways between, qualifications;
- (b) supervise the renewal of qualification documents and their adaptation to changes in qualifications and work organisation;
- (c) update the RNCP;
- (d) inform the public and companies about the qualifications listed in the RNCP and those recognised in the member states of the European Union;
- (e) issue recommendations for awarding bodies;
- (f) draw up a new classification covering levels of certification in relation to jobs held.

The CNCP was a platform for cooperation between all ministries involved in the design and award of qualifications (education, higher education, labour, social affairs, agriculture, culture, youth and sports, defence, finance, health) and the social partners and other stakeholders (such as chambers and representatives of the regions) involved in the qualifications system. Given the increasing diversity of qualifications in France over recent decades, the broad composition of the CNCP ⁽²¹⁾ was necessary to ensure quality, credibility and ownership. CNCP was entitled to be informed about vocational qualifications created by social partners, even when these were not intended for registration in the RNCP.

⁽²⁰⁾ Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation [*Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale*]. *JORF*, 18.1.2002, p. 1008.
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

⁽²¹⁾ The CNCP consisted of a chairperson, 16 ministerial representatives, 10 social partners, three elected representatives of the consular chambers, three elected representatives of the regions, and 12 qualified persons, a general rapporteur and two deputy rapporteurs. The members were appointed by the French prime minister, for a renewable five-year term (CNCP, 2010).

The concept of a ‘national qualifications framework’ came into use in the context of EQF implementation. Through an agreement at government level, endorsed by the *Secrétariat général des affaires européennes* (under the authority of the prime minister), it was decided that the RNCP would be the French NQF, with the CNCP acting as EQF national coordination point (NCP). With the 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one’s professional future ⁽²²⁾, which created a new article in the Labour Code ⁽²³⁾, the French NQF became formally embedded in legislation, as distinct from the RNCP. Its levels and characteristics are defined by the 2019 Decree on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications ⁽²⁴⁾.

The recent legislative changes also brought a new national authority for the regulation and financing of continuing VET and apprenticeships, France Compétences ⁽²⁵⁾, with a quadripartite structure representing the State, the regions, the employers and the employees. In January 2019, responsibility for the French NQF, the RNCP, and the ‘specific register’ (previously known as ‘the inventory’) was transferred to the new authority, which encompasses and replaces a number of structures previously involved in the governance of vocational training and certification ⁽²⁶⁾, including the CNCP. A commission for

⁽²²⁾ Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one’s professional future [*Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnelle*].
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

⁽²³⁾ The Labour Code, Article L6113-1.
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCode.do;jsessionid=497C720EED8B07EC2A0784DB96C5D6FC.tplgfr37s_3?idSectionTA=LEGISCTA000037374052&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006072050&dateTexte=20190301

⁽²⁴⁾ Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational qualifications [*Décret n° 2019-14 du 8 janvier 2019 relatif au cadre national des certifications professionnelles*]. *JORF*, No 0007, 9.1.2019.
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=6A9D2FCF7FB127AC6021BD782B475904.tplgfr34s_2?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037964754&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id&idJO=JORFCONT000037964593

⁽²⁵⁾ <https://www.francecompetences.fr/>

⁽²⁶⁾ In addition to the CNCP, the bodies replaced by France Compétences include: the National council for employment, vocational training and guidance (Conseil national de l’emploi, de la formation et de l’orientation professionnelles, CNEFOP), the Joint fund for securing professional career paths (Fonds paritaire de sécurisation des parcours professionnels, FPSPP) and the National inter-professional committee for employment and training (Comité paritaire interprofessionnel national pour l’emploi et la formation, COPANEF).

vocational and professional qualifications will operate within France Compétences, with the following tasks ⁽²⁷⁾:

- (a) harmonising the terminology used by the ministries and other awarding bodies in relation to the titles of vocational/professional qualifications, the activities envisaged, and the competences they certify;
- (b) ensuring the quality of information provided to individuals and companies about vocational/professional qualifications, and ensuring that the standards of qualifications registered in the RNCP are publicly accessible;
- (c) contributing to international work on the quality of qualifications;
- (d) addressing all issues related to vocational / professional qualifications raised by the ministries and the national committees for employment of professional branches.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽²⁸⁾

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in France is strongly articulated to lifelong learning, training and employment policies. Its development builds on longstanding practices of identification and recognition of prior learning and professional experience. While different procedures and mechanisms for identification, documentation and assessment of non-formal and informal learning have been developed ⁽²⁹⁾ this section is concerned with the system of validation of acquired experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE), whose goal

⁽²⁷⁾ Decree No 2018-1172 of 18 December 2018 on the conditions for registering vocational and professional qualifications and certifications and authorisations in the national registers [*Décret n° 2018-1172 du 18 décembre 2018 relatif aux conditions d'enregistrement des certifications professionnelles et des certifications et habilitations dans les répertoires nationaux*]. *JORF*, No 0294, 20.12.2018. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2018/12/18/2018-1172/jo/texte>

⁽²⁸⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

⁽²⁹⁾ In addition to VAE, there is a mechanism for the recognition of professional and personal experience granting access to a programme through exemption from normal requirements (at higher education level, this procedure known as *Validation des acquis professionnels et personnels* (VAPP); the skill audits or *bilan de compétences* aimed at identifying skills and competences acquired during one's professional life without targeting certification and without an assessment procedure; and other types of competence portfolios developed outside of validation procedures.

is obtaining a qualification. VAE includes, by definition, the stages of identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The French VAE system is now integrated in the Labour and education code and procedures are defined by legislation ⁽³⁰⁾, ensuring consistency across sectors. VAE allows ‘the award of whole or parts of qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose (*finalité professionnelle*) at all levels’ (European Commission et al., forthcoming, p. 2), without the need to go through formal training. Thus, both full and partial validation are possible, the latter resulting in a document taking stock of the units of competences validated by the candidate. However, it is not possible to apply for VAE based solely on learning outcomes: it is required to have carried out at least one year of activity directly related to the activities outlined in the qualification standards.

⁽³⁰⁾ Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation [*Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale*]. *JORF*, 18.1.2002, P. 1008.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

Law No 2007-148 of 2 February 2007 on the modernisation of public service [*Loi de modernisation de la fonction publique 2007-148 du 2 février 2007*]. *Journal officiel*, 6.2.2007.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000465739>

Decree No 2007-1470 of 15 October 2007 on continuing vocational training of public servants [*Décret 2007-1470 du 15 octobre 2007 relative à la formation professionnelle tout au long de la vie des fonctionnaires de l'Etat*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000469540>

Decree No 2002-1459 of 16 December 2002 concerning the responsibilities of employers with regards to the validation of acquired experience and modifying title V of Book IX of the Labour Code (second part: Decrees in the State Council) [*Décret 2002-1459 du 16 décembre 2002 relatif à la prise en charge par les employeurs des actions de validation des acquis de l'expérience et portant modification du titre V du livre IX du Code du travail (deuxième partie: Décrets en Conseil d'Etat)*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005633663&dateTexte=20181218>

Decree No 2002-1460 of 16 December 2002 regarding the verification of bodies that assist candidates in the validation of acquired experience and modifying title IX of book IX of the Labour Code (second part: Decrees in the State Council) [*Décret 2002-1460 du 16 décembre 2002 relatif au contrôle des organismes qui assistent des candidats à une validation des acquis de l'expérience et modifiant le titre IX du livre IX du code du travail (deuxième partie : Décrets en Conseil d'Etat)*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005633664&dateTexte=20180821>

Circular No 2003-127 of 1 August 2003 on the organisation of validation of acquired experience [*Circulaire n°2003-127 du 01-08-2003 sur l'organisation de la validation des acquis de l'expérience*]. *Official bulletin*, No 32, 4.9.2003.

<https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2003/32/MENE0301761C.htm>

The focus on certification is considered a strength of the VAE system, whose development was simultaneous to the restructuring of the qualifications system in 2002. Qualifications obtained through VAE are the same as those awarded via initial or continuous formal education and training or apprenticeship and they must be registered in the RNCP. Qualification standards (*référentiels de certification*) in the RNCP describe skills, knowledge and know-how defined in relation to occupation standards (*référentiels d'activités*). A VAE procedure must be in place for all qualifications registered in the RNCP (with the exception of those linked to 'regulated professions', where carrying out activity without having previously obtained the qualification is not legal). Thus, VAE is considered a fourth route to qualifications ⁽³¹⁾. In higher education, VAE is used in conjunction with the European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS).

Since 2002, more than 330 000 full qualifications awarded by ministries have been obtained through VAE, mostly in the health and social sectors. However, the number of applications has been gradually decreasing across all ministries. Data are not available for other type of awarding bodies.

In comparison with systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning in other European countries, the French VAE system is very well developed. Legislative initiatives over the past five years resulted in substantial changes addressing some of the challenges that had been identified: the need to broaden access, diversify candidate profiles, shorten the length of the process, encourage its use across a wider range of qualifications, and improve stakeholder coordination. The system was considered demanding, especially for candidates with low skills and low levels of qualification. The 2014 Law on VET, employment and social democracy ⁽³²⁾ broadened access to VAE for individuals without a qualification at EQF level 3, recognising as 'experience' training periods

⁽³¹⁾ According to Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on social modernisation (Article 134), qualifications (the *diplômes* or qualifications with a vocational/professional purpose) are obtained via the following routes: school and university, apprenticeship, continuing vocational training or, in whole or in part, by validation of acquired experience (VAE).

⁽³²⁾ Law No 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy [*Loi no. 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000028683576>

Decree No 2014-1354 of 12 November 2014 on measures regarding the validation of acquired experience [*Décret no. 2014-1354 du 12 novembre 2014 portant diverses mesures relatives à la validation des acquis de l'expérience*]. *JORF*, No 0263, p. 19184, 14.11.2014).

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2014/11/12/ETSD1417561D/jo>

undertaken in a work context; it introduced the personal training account (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) for easier financing, improved support to candidates, clarifying the role of various stakeholders involved, and included provisions for statistical monitoring of VAE pathways. The 2016 Law on work, modernising social dialogue and securing career paths ⁽³³⁾ reduced the minimum duration of required experience from three years to one, strengthened the support and guidance offered to candidates, simplified procedures, and removed the timeframe for the validity of parts of qualifications obtained through VAE. The latter aspect is linked to the use of units/blocks of competences (*blocs de compétences*), which remain valid without a time limit and which facilitate the articulation of VAE with training. The governance of the VAE system, considered one of its weak points, is being reorganised along with the governance of vocational training following the new 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ⁽³⁴⁾. The new governing body, France Compétences, replaces institutions previously involved in the coordination of the VAE system, including the *Conseil national de l'emploi, de la formation et de l'orientation professionnelles* (CNEFOP), so far in charge of the statistical monitoring of the use of VAE.

NQF implementation

The French qualifications system is a mature one, and the NQF – up until 2019 identified with the five level structure of the RNCP (CNCP, 2010) – is fully operational. Its implementation has been closely linked to that of the system for validating non-formal and informal learning (VAE), the two being mutually supportive: all qualifications included in the RNCP ⁽³⁵⁾ can be acquired through

⁽³³⁾ Law No 2016-1088 of 8 August 2016 on labour, modernisation of social dialogue and securisation of professional career [*Loi n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016 relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000033000929&dateTexte=20160908>

⁽³⁴⁾ Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future [*Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*].

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

⁽³⁵⁾ From 2013 to 2015, 9 907 active qualifications were registered in the RNCP. A main distinction is made between diplomas, degrees and qualifications issued on behalf of the state and referring to national laws (Ministries of National Education and Higher

validation and need to have a VAE procedure specified. Requirements for inclusion of qualifications in the RNCP are specified in legislation ⁽³⁶⁾, aiming for national coherence and the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. As of 2019, these requirements include:

- (a) definition of qualifications using an occupational standard (*référentiel d'activités, de métiers ou d'emplois*); a competence standard (*référentiel de compétences et de connaissances*) specifying competences and knowledge, including transversal ones; and an assessment standard (*référentiel d'évaluation*) defining the criteria and methods for assessing learning outcomes;
- (b) structure of qualifications using units/blocks of competences ⁽³⁷⁾ that can be assessed and validated;
- (c) classification by field of activity and allocation of an NQF level.

Registration in the RNCP signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the CNCP and, since 2019, in the corresponding commission within France Compétences, underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary to:

- (a) receive funding;
- (b) finance validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (c) exercise certain professions and occupations;
- (d) enter apprenticeship schemes.

The introduction of the RNCP in 2002 ⁽³⁸⁾ opened the possibility for inclusion of industry or sectoral qualifications (*Certificats de qualification professionnelle* -

Education, Agriculture); they are included by entitlement and eligible for automatic inclusion and 'private' qualifications included by request (i.e. on demand) awarded by education and training providers, chambers and social partners in their own name. In the first category there are 7 423 qualifications, in the second 2 484 (Paddeu et al., 2018).

⁽³⁶⁾ Decree No 2018-1172 of 18 December 2018 on the conditions for registering vocational qualifications and certifications and authorisations in the national registers [*Décret n° 2018-1172 du 18 décembre 2018 relatif aux conditions d'enregistrement des certifications professionnelles et des certifications et habilitations dans les répertoires nationaux*]. *JORF*, No 0294, 20.12.2018.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2018/12/18/2018-1172/jo/texte>

⁽³⁷⁾ For more information on units of competences, please see the section *Levels and use of learning outcomes* above.

⁽³⁸⁾ Law No 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 on Social Modernisation [Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002 de modernisation sociale]. *JORF*, p.1008, 18.1.2002.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&d ateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

CQPs), diversifying the range of qualifications that could be nationally recognised. However, CQPs ⁽³⁹⁾ did not have a level; at the same time, other qualifications, such as the general education *Baccalauréat*, were classified at a particular level (level IV in this case), but could not be included in the RNCP. This gave rise to questions and left open to interpretation which qualifications are part of the NQF (Paddeu et al., 2018). With the recent reform of the VET system, the 2018 Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future ⁽⁴⁰⁾ and the 2019 Decree on the national framework of vocational and professional qualifications ⁽⁴¹⁾ strengthen the legal basis of the NQF and define it as distinct from the RNCP. Qualifications under the responsibility of social partners (CQPs) will also be levelled and included in the NQF, clarifying uncertainties around their status.

The RNCP continues to act as technical support to the NQF ⁽⁴²⁾ and it is one of the two qualification databases in the country. The second register (or inventory, *Inventaire*) was set up by the CNCPC in 2014 ⁽⁴³⁾ to include awards that could not be levelled as they were not directly associated with an occupation recognised through an industry-level agreement ⁽⁴⁴⁾ (Paddeu; Veneau & Meliva, 2018). The two registers make it possible to give an overview of all labour market relevant diplomas and certificates, with or without a level. An evaluation of the

⁽³⁹⁾ The number of CQPs included in the register is quite small, but slowly growing in some sectors.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Law No 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future [*Loi n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*].
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&dateTexte=20190227>

⁽⁴¹⁾ Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework of vocational qualifications [*Décret n° 2019-14 du 8 janvier 2019 relatif au cadre national des certifications professionnelles*]. *JORF*, No 0007, 9.1.2019.
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=6A9D2FCF7FB127AC6021BD782B475904.tplgfr34s_2?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037964754&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id&idJO=JORFCONT000037964593

⁽⁴²⁾ The RNCP database is available at: <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/>

⁽⁴³⁾ Law 2014-288 of 5 March 2014 on vocational training, employment and social democracy [*Loi No 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014 relative à la formation professionnelle, à l'emploi et à la démocratie sociale*]. *JORF*, No 0055, p. 4848, 6.3.2014.
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2014/3/5/ETSX1400015L/jo/texte>

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Examples include accreditations resulting from a legal obligation and required to work in a particular profession (e.g. electrician accreditations); those highly valued in certain fields and recommended by social partners or certain bodies (e.g. qualification in copper welding as per standard NF EN ISO 9606-3); and those related to a homogeneous set of competences required in one or more occupations and that help to access the labour market (e.g. *certificat voltaire* (spelling skills)).

policy for vocational certification from November 2016 ⁽⁴⁵⁾, found that measures had to be taken to avoid the proliferation of qualifications, by giving more authority to the commission in charge of the RNCP, a recommendation that has been reflected in the recently introduced governance arrangements.

NQF levels are indicated on all qualification documents issued for VET and higher education qualifications, and on private and international qualifications included in the RNCP; EQF levels are included only on some qualification documents. Both NQF and EQF levels are included on Europass certificate supplements ⁽⁴⁶⁾, but not on diploma supplements.

The French NQF is known and used by education and training institutions and providers in France. Employers are aware of the levels, though they may not be aware of the NQF itself. Guidance and counselling practitioners and recognition authorities are aware of the framework due to cooperation between the EQF NCP and the National office for guidance (*Office national d'information sur les enseignements et les professions*, ONISEP) and ENIC NARIC France. There is also interest in the NQF among the general public (pupils and parents), as registration of a qualification in the RNCP is seen as proof of recognition by the state. The main channels for disseminating information on the NQF and the EQF have been the EQF NCP website ⁽⁴⁷⁾, the RNCP database itself, and interviews for the media. A communication campaign to inform on the new NQF levels is expected to be organised by France Compétences or the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue. In particular, one challenge identified so far in communicating about the French NQF has been conveying to end users the notion that a level in the RNCP reflects parity of esteem between qualifications for the labour market, but not automatic recognition by universities (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Inspection Générale des Affaires Sociales; Inspection Générale de l'Administration de l'Education Nationale et de la Recherche (2016). *Evaluation de la politique de certification professionnelle - propositions de «scenarios de transformation»* [General Inspection of Social Affairs; General Inspection of National Education and Research Administration (2016). *Evaluation of the policy for vocational certification - proposals for 'transformation scenarios'*]. <http://www.igas.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2015-125R2.pdf>

⁽⁴⁶⁾ The French inventory of certificate supplements is available through the RNCP database: <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/>

⁽⁴⁷⁾ The website of the CNCP, which hosted the EQF NCP until 1 January 2019: <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr>

Referencing to the EQF

The French NQF, as defined by the RNCP, was referenced to the EQF in October 2010 (CNCP, 2010). The process involved all ministries, social partners and other stakeholders represented in the CNCP.

The lack of low-level vocational qualifications 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. Following the referencing process, work was resumed on a new classification.

An updated referencing report covering the new level structure and governance arrangements introduced in 2018 will be presented to the EQF advisory group. There is no set date for this yet, as implementation of the recent reforms will take time (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Important lessons and future plans

One of the oldest in Europe, the French NQF is embedded in the national context, characterised by ‘a long history of labour organisation and social dialogue’ (Allais, 2017, p. 465). Its main distinctive feature is the strong labour market focus and, consequently, the exclusion of secondary general education qualifications. Up until 2018, the framework was shaped by the classification of training levels developed in 1969, which created a hierarchy for nationally recognised qualifications, and the National register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP), which ratified the separation between qualifications and the training courses that may lead to them (Paddeu et al., 2018). The setup of the RNCP was closely interlinked with that of the validation system, supporting the acquisition of qualifications through validation of prior learning and work experience. Given that the French qualifications system and, in particular, relationships between qualifications, were gradually shaped by stakeholder negotiations and agreements linking qualification levels to occupations and wage levels, updating the level structure was a challenging and lengthy process. The new eight-level structure and learning-outcomes-based level descriptors, adopted recently as part of wider VET reforms, bring the French framework closer to the EQF, increasing comparability between French qualifications and those in other European countries. Implementation of recent reforms will take time, and the degree to which the French NQF will maintain its distinctiveness as an ‘occupational framework’ (Allais, 2017) remains to be seen.

Developments related to the French NQF since 2002 illustrate the need for NQFs to evolve continuously to stay relevant. Two main trends have been noted (Paddeu et al., 2018) in the evolution of the qualifications system: the remarkable diversification of the range of qualifications recognised by the state, and the shift in the object of recognition from duration of training to learning outcomes. The conception of what can be considered a qualification in France may also be subject to change. Departing from the strong emphasis on ‘full qualifications’ (*qualifications complètes*), developments in recent years included several initiatives to make qualification and training pathways more flexible: the introduction of units/blocks of competences as identifiable parts of qualifications that can be assessed and validated independently; the personal training account (*compte personnel de formation*, CPF) which follows the same logic of breaking down qualifications into blocks of learning outcomes that can be acquired gradually (with the help of the CPF); and the introduction of a new qualifications register – in addition to the existing RNCP – for inclusion of smaller awards.

The role of the CNCP until recently and, since 2019, that of the new commission within France Compétences replacing the CNCP, as ‘gatekeeper’ of the French framework has been important for two reasons: it has supported the credibility of registered qualifications and ownership of registration decisions across a wide range of stakeholders due to the quadripartite composition of these structures. However, a 2016 evaluation of the vocational certification policy has recommended that measures are needed to avoid the proliferation of qualifications. This illustrates the difficulty balancing the task of achieving increased flexibility in the qualifications system while maintaining the value and credibility of qualifications.

Main sources of information:

- The EQF NCP for France is, as of 1st January 2019, hosted by France Compétences: <https://www.francecompetences.fr/>
- The website of the CNCP, which hosted the EQF NCP until 1st January 2019: <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/>
- National register of vocational and professional qualifications (RNCP): <http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/>
- 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>

French national qualifications framework (NQF/RNCP) (*)

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

(*) This table presents the level structure of the French NQF as referenced to the EQF. A new level structure was adopted by Decree No 2019-14 of 8 January 2019 on the national framework for vocational and professional qualifications.

(**) BEP and BEPA are intermediary qualifications granted to young people who have passed the BEP exam and are preparing for *baccalauréat professionnel*.

Source: CNCP, 2017.

Abbreviations

CNCP	Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle [National committee on vocational qualifications]
CNIS	Conseil national de l'information statistique [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]

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