



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2022  
**NETHERLANDS**



# European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022 – Netherlands

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## 1. Introduction

This report is part of the European inventory of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Since 2009, Cedefop has carried out a systematic mapping and analysis of NQF developments in countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process. These reviews, done in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, have directly supported the development of operational and sustainable NQFs. The report offers a detailed description of the structure and scope of the Dutch qualifications framework (NLQF), and its objectives, functions and institutional arrangements, as well as data on its implementation and impact.

The NLQF (*Nederlands Kwalificatieraamwerk*) was adopted in 2011, building on and integrating the qualifications framework for higher education, which had been self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area in 2009. The comprehensive NLQF is a systematic classification of all qualifications in the country, covering two main groups: regulated qualifications awarded in the formal education and training system (formal qualifications), and non-regulated – mainly private – qualifications awarded on the labour market (non-formal qualifications). It has eight main levels, plus an entry level below EQF level 1, and a sublevel of level 4 (level 4+). Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills, responsibility and independence, and context. The NLQF is operational. Referencing to the EQF was completed in January 2012 and an updated referencing report was adopted in 2019.

## 2. National context

### 2.1. Policy context

The Netherlands continues to be well situated against most key EU indicators for education and training, although the level of basic skills and key competences declined in both primary and secondary education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was also a decline in students' socioemotional well-being. The share of Dutch young people not in employment, education or training is the smallest in Europe (5.5 % in 2021), and a very low percentage of students leave education and training early (5.3 % in 2021). While most of those who dropped out in 2021 did so from vocational education and training (VET), the sector fares well in comparison with the EU average, capturing 68.1 % of upper secondary pupils in 2020, and it benefits from continued government support. The country has a relatively high percentage of highly skilled young people with a tertiary degree (55.6 % in 2021), and the employment rate of recent tertiary graduates is very high

(95.2 %). Participation in adult learning is more than double the EU average (26.6 % in 2021), and several measures have been adopted to promote upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning (European Commission. DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

## **2.2. NQF legal basis**

The NLQF was adopted in September 2011 by the Dutch government and parliament. The need to strengthen its legal basis has been recognised: a dedicated NLQF Act has been prepared and has undergone public consultation; the legislative proposal will be sent for approval to the parliament in 2023 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The new act will formally acknowledge the NLQF levels and level descriptors, the generic classification of regulated qualifications and the possibility of classifying non-regulated qualifications; it will regulate the indication of NLQF/EQF levels on qualification documents; and it will address the legal status of the NLQF national coordination point (NCP) as an independent organisation (NLQF NCP, 2019).

## **3. NQF objectives and functions**

The development of the NLQF was prompted by the 2008 Council recommendation on the EQF. The NLQF's purpose is to support lifelong learning, and the national and international mobility of students and employees, enabling them to identify their level of education and training, and to find appropriate programmes; to understand the levels of national and international qualifications; and to understand how different qualifications contribute to improving workers' skills in the labour market. The main objectives of the NLQF include increasing the transparency and comparability of qualifications and learning routes within the Netherlands and within Europe, stimulating thinking of learning outcomes as the building blocks of qualifications, increasing understanding of qualification levels across the labour market and aiding communication between stakeholders in education and employment (van der Sanden et al., 2012).

The NLQF is primarily a communication framework. In the formal system, education pathways are regulated by law and the NLQF has no role in regulating transfer and access, or in deciding entitlement to qualifications and degrees.

## 4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

### 4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The NLQF has one entry level (below EQF level 1), eight levels equivalent to those in the EQF, and a sublevel (level 4+). The entry level was created to support low-qualified individuals in gaining a certificate and to increase their motivation to participate in further learning. Level 4+ was introduced to distinguish the pre-university pathway (pre-university secondary education – *oorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* (VWO)) from upper secondary general and VET qualifications classified at level 4.

Descriptors of NLQF levels are based on learning outcomes, inspired by EQF descriptors and with some important differences resulting from elaboration and partial reorientation. The NLQF level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills (applying knowledge, problem-solving skills, learning and development skills, information skills, communication skills), and responsibility and independence. A separate context descriptor has also been defined, which is used along with the described knowledge to determine the grade of skills difficulty. The subdomains introduced for skills are meant to make descriptors more relevant to the Dutch context, reflecting experiences of applying learning outcomes, for example in VET (e.g. upper secondary vocational education – *middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (MBO)). Guidelines were developed to avoid different interpretations of the descriptors when classifying qualifications <sup>(1)</sup>. Since their adoption, level descriptors have been tested and fine-tuned in the process of levelling non-formal qualifications. The updated descriptors have been in use since January 2020, without any changes in the initial levelling of qualifications.

### 4.2. NQF scope and coverage

The NLQF covers the entire spectrum of Dutch qualifications:

- (a) formal qualifications: These are awarded in the formal education system (lower secondary general and pre-vocational education (*voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (VMBO)), MBO and upper secondary general education (*hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* (HAVO)), VWO and higher education (WO and *hoger beroepsonderwijs*)); regulated by the education ministry <sup>(2)</sup>; and offered by public and private providers. Traditionally, they are classified into 17 qualification types, and they were levelled to the NQF en bloc;

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(1) More information is available in Annex 4 of NLQF NCP (2019).

(2) The official title is [Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science](#).

- (b) non-formal qualifications: These are not regulated by the education ministry, but rather are awarded by stakeholders in the labour market (private training providers, companies, sectors and examination bodies).

In providing a systematic classification of both formal and non-formal qualifications, the NLQF reflects the nature of the Dutch qualifications system, where private and public providers supplement each other. In principle, all NLQF levels are open to all qualifications of all education sectors, based on a comparison of the learning outcomes of that qualification with the NLQF level descriptors, and are not related to a specific study load <sup>(3)</sup>.

Approximately 4 000 formal qualifications have been linked to the NLQF: 6 general education qualifications, 500 VET qualifications (levels 1–4) and 3 476 higher education qualifications (level 5–8) <sup>(4)</sup>. In addition, 207 non-formal qualifications had been levelled to the NLQF by February 2023.

The reallocation of specific upper secondary VET qualifications from NLQF levels 4–5, based on their learning outcomes, has been under discussion; it was proposed by stakeholders in VET and opposed by those in higher education (NLQF NCP, 2019).

The Netherlands has established a procedure for the inclusion of international qualifications in the NLQF; in 2022, nine Business and Technology Education Council qualifications from Pearson Benelux were levelled to NLQF levels 3 to 5 <sup>(5)</sup>.

Table 1. Dutch qualifications framework (NLQF)

NLQF level	Formal qualification	Non-formal qualification <sup>(a)</sup>	EQF level
8	Doctorate ( <i>Doctoraat</i> ) Designer ( <i>Ontwerper</i> ) Medical specialist ( <i>Medisch specialist</i> )		8
7	Master's degree	Example: social studies	7

<sup>(3)</sup> Initially, classifying non-formal qualifications and including them in the NLQF was possible only for qualifications with a minimum of 400 hours of nominal study time. This requirement was amended and smaller qualifications can now also be included, provided they demonstrate labour market relevance.

<sup>(4)</sup> Internal communication with the NLQF-NCP

<sup>(5)</sup> Internal communication with the NLQF-NCP



NLQF level	Formal qualification	Non-formal qualification <sup>(a)</sup>	EQF level
6	Bachelor's degree	<p>Examples:</p> <p>Anesthetist employee (<i>Anesthesiemedewerker</i>)</p> <p>Dialysis nurse (<i>Dialyse verpleegkundige</i>)</p> <p>Secondary defence formation (Middelbare defensie vorming)</p> <p>Officer of the royal military police (<i>Officier koninklijke marechaussee onderbouw</i>)</p> <p>Officer of the navy force (<i>Officier korps zeedienst</i>)</p>	6
5	Associate degree	<p>Examples:</p> <p>consultant for payroll services and benefits</p> <p>hotel service management</p> <p>operational technician for energy production technology (<i>Operationeel technicus energie productietechniek</i>)</p> <p>trainer-coach 5</p>	5
4+	Pre-university education (VWO) Pre-university education for adults (VAVO-VWO)		4
4	VET level 4 (MBO 4) Upper secondary general education for adults (VAVO-HAVO) Upper secondary general education (HAVO)	<p>Examples:</p> <p>instructor 4 (<i>Opleider 4</i>)</p> <p>airport service agent</p> <p>training in food technology (<i>Opleiding levensmiddelen technologie</i>)</p> <p>industry diploma for all-round beautician (<i>Branchediploma allround schoonheidsspecialist</i>)</p> <p>industry diploma for medical pedicure (<i>Branchediploma medisch pedicure</i>)</p>	4
3	VET level 3 (MBO 3)	<p>Examples:</p> <p>dog grooming training (<i>Vakopleiding Hondentrimmen</i>)</p> <p>general investigator (<i>Algemeen Opsporingsambtenaar</i>)</p> <p>swimming teacher (<i>Zwemonderwijzer</i>)</p> <p>trainer-coach 3</p> <p>industry diploma pedicure (<i>Branchediploma pedicure</i>)</p>	3

NLQF level	Formal qualification	Non-formal qualification <sup>(a)</sup>	EQF level
2	VET level 2 (MBO 2) Pre-vocational secondary education – theoretical pathway (VMBO tl) Pre-vocational secondary education – combined theoretical pathway (VMBO gl) Pre-vocational secondary education – advanced vocational pathway (VMBO kb) Basic education 3 for adults (VAVO) Basic education 3 for adults (Basiseducatie 3)	Examples: military police security ( <i>Marechausseebeveiliging</i> ) assistant swimming teacher ( <i>Assistent zwemonderwijzer</i> ) sales employee ( <i>Verkoopmedewerker</i> )	2
1	VET level 1 (MBO 1) Pre-vocational secondary education – basic vocational pathway (VMBO bb) Basic education 2 for adults (Basiseducatie 2)	Examples: operating assistant ( <i>Bedieningsassistent</i> ) kitchen assistant ( <i>Keukenassistent</i> )	1
Entry level	Basic education 1 for adults (Basiseducatie 1)		

NB: VAVO, general secondary education for adults (*voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs*).

(a) In the national context, non-formal qualifications are qualifications that are not regulated by the education ministry, are awarded by organisations outside formal education and training, and are relevant to the labour market (e.g. those from private training providers, companies, sectors and examination bodies). They are included in the NLQF after completion of the quality assurance procedures.

Source: European Commission and Cedefop, 2022

### 4.3. Use of learning outcomes

Dutch education and training had a strong tradition of a competence and learning outcomes orientation before the development of the NLQF. Qualifications in secondary education are based on attainment targets. VET is probably the type that is most advanced in competence orientation. A learning-outcomes-based qualifications framework for VET, using NLQF level descriptors, is in place. Since 2016, VET qualifications have been revised using the NLQF level descriptors, become more flexible and reduced in number. Each VET programme consists of a general part, a profile part and optional modules. A study initiated in 2021 is looking into ways to further increase flexibility in the VET qualifications framework to respond to the needs of students, adult learners and employers (Cedefop and ReferNet, forthcoming).

Similar changes can be observed in general and higher education. The introduction of the qualifications framework for higher education has contributed to an overall shift towards learning outcomes. The education ministry is supporting higher education providers in using learning outcomes related to the NLQF levels in pilot projects that aim to develop flexible partial learning pathways <sup>(6)</sup>. This has supported access to and participation in higher education. Parts of qualifications do not receive a separate NLQF level, but are instead listed with the statement 'this partial qualification is part of a regulated qualification with NLQF level X'. A draft law on the creation of personalised learning pathways within education programmes – making use of learning outcomes and of prior learning, and facilitating use of learning outcomes in microcredentials – is under consultation (Government of the Netherlands, 2021).

The NLQF-NCP helps organisations that grant non-formal qualifications to describe their qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, and has developed [guidelines](#) for doing so.

#### **4.4. Quality assurance arrangements**

Higher education qualifications are accredited by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders, considering the level descriptors of both the qualifications framework of the European higher education area and the NLQF. The Inspectorate of Education verifies compliance with quality assurance regulations in all education sectors, including quality development in higher education (but excepting programme accreditation). The upcoming NLQF Law will give the Inspectorate of Education the authority to issue administrative fines for the misuse of the NLQF levels (NLQF NCP, 2019).

The criteria and procedures for the inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the NLQF are presented in Box 1. There has been a recent change to the online procedures for requesting validation and classification; initial reviews of the update have been positive, as it saves time for both the NCP and applicants (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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<sup>(6)</sup> The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders has developed a dedicated accreditation framework for these pilot projects; the framework focuses on learning outcomes instead of input requirements.

**Box 1. Inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the NLQF**

To be included in the NLQF, a non-formal qualification must be:

- written in terms of learning outcomes;
- concluded with a summative assessment that is independent of the learning path;
- considered substantial (learning time of at least 400 hours) or labour market relevant;
- underpinned by quality assurance.

Requests from private training providers, companies, sectors or examination bodies for classification of qualifications into the NLQF undergo a two-stage procedure:

- a validity check on the provider;
- the classification of the qualification at an NLQF level.

The validity check aims to ensure the trustworthiness of the organisation, looking at aspects such as legal status, property rights, continuity and quality assurance. Approved quality assurance arrangements include accreditation by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders, supervision by the Inspectorate of Education, fulfilment of the criteria of International Organization for Standardization standard 9001:2008/2015 and supervision by the Stichting Examenkamer. In the absence of an approved external quality system, an on-site organisational audit is carried out. Validation is granted for 6 years, during which the applicant can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling.

The applicant organisation indicates the level it sees as the most appropriate for a qualification, based on a comparison of its learning outcomes with the NLQF level descriptors. The workload, approach to assessment/examination, and links to relevant occupational profiles must be specified. The 'best fit' principle is used in levelling.

Validity checks cost between EUR 1 000 and EUR 7 500, depending on whether an approved quality assurance system is in place. Submitting one qualification for inclusion is set at EUR 2 500. Re-evaluation of organisational validity and of the qualification classification (every 6 years) cost EUR 1 000 each.

Source: NLQF NCP website: [Validiteit NLQF aanvragen – Procedure](#).

The procedures for the inclusion of international qualifications in the NLQF are essentially the same as those for non-formal qualifications; however, there is the further condition that the organisation that grants the international qualification must be a Dutch legal entity, registered with the Chamber of Commerce in the Netherlands (NLQF NCP, 2022a).

## 5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The department for vocational education within the education ministry is responsible for the development and implementation of the NLQF, including the legislative process, governance and funding. The day-to-day running of the framework is carried out by the NLQF/EQF NCP. Since 2012, this has been hosted

by [CINOP](#), an independent organisation reporting to the education ministry. The main tasks of the NCP are levelling non-formal qualifications to the NLQF (levelling of formal qualifications is the direct responsibility of the education ministry); maintaining the NLQF register of non-formal qualifications and the NLQF database; maintaining and evaluating the NLQF and its links to the EQF; monitoring implementation; communicating information about the NLQF; and supporting the NLQF's main stakeholder groups.

The NCP accomplishes its tasks through its bureau <sup>(7)</sup>, has 3.5 full-time equivalent employees <sup>(8)</sup>, and is supported by several independent external structures and policy advisors from the education ministry. Its Programme Council decides on the classification of non-formal qualifications, based on advice from the Quality Commission (which assesses the validity of applicant organisations, with support from a pool of auditors) and the Classification Commission (which makes recommendations on qualification levels based on assessment by a team of independent experts). The Programme Council and the two commissions are each composed of one representative of the labour market, one of the formal education sector, and one of the non-regulated education and training sector. An Appeal Commission has also been set up. The activities of the NCP are funded by the education ministry (EUR 0.6 million per year), through a European Commission grant and through revenue from the classification of non-formal qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

A mechanism for systematic stakeholder involvement has been set up in the form of a sounding board to advise the NCP on policy aspects, to act as ambassadors to a wider audience, and to answer questions and deal with concerns from education and training stakeholders (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market is responsible for maintaining and updating the qualifications framework for secondary VET.

## 6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

### 6.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

A system for the validation of prior learning (VPL) (*Erkenning van Verworven Competentie*) was introduced in 1998, aiming to bridge the gap between education

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<sup>(7)</sup> More information (in Dutch) about the national NLQF NCP ([Nationaal Coördinatiepunt NLQF](#)).

<sup>(8)</sup> Internal communication with the NLQF-NCP

supply and labour market demand by taking stock of existing knowledge and skills<sup>(9)</sup>. Quality assurance came into focus in 2006, and includes linkages to national qualifications, sector standards, function profiles, career paths and citizenship activities. Since 2013, VPL policy has promoted personalised learning and a participative society where all stakeholders take ownership for their role in lifelong learning. Since 2016, VPL has operated along two routes: one linked to the labour market, and the other to the education system.

The labour market route is aimed at career guidance and development for adults to support employability and better matching between employees' capacities and occupational profiles or on-the-job learning. All non-formal qualifications can be used as a basis for VPL (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Prior learning outcomes are validated against sector/industry standards or national qualification standards. A VPL procedure results in the award of a certificate of experience (*ervaringscertificaat*) recognising vocational and general competences in relation to sectoral or formal education standards, and/or a certificate of professional competence (*vakbekwaamheidsbewijs*) linked to professional standards and competences, or a certificate of generic and transversal competences (*competentiebewijs*) linked to human resources systems.

The education route validates formally/non-formally/informally acquired competences against national qualification standards to support further learning, to grant exemptions or to acquire partial/full formal qualifications in VET and higher education, and to allow entry to an education programme. Both VET and higher education qualification standards are connected to the NLQF (NLQF NCP, 2020). Legal provisions on validation are embedded in the legislation governing VET and higher education. VET schools are supported to validate competences at NLQF levels 2–4. In higher education, VPL is mainly offered in higher professional education (*hoger beroepsonderwijs*) and less in research universities. Initiatives based on the learning outcomes approach have been piloted since 2016 to make learning routes more flexible for students in part-time and work-based programmes, integrating independent learning and validation<sup>(10)</sup>.

The NLQF seeks to strengthen the role of validation as an integrated part of the qualifications system. It makes relationships between non-formal labour market qualifications and formal qualifications more transparent. The NLQF levels and the use of level descriptors also help to clarify the wider value of people's skills and competences beyond their performance at occupational level. Sectoral

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<sup>(9)</sup> This section draws on Duvekot (2019).

<sup>(10)</sup> A total of 21 universities of applied sciences with over 400 programmes leading to associate, bachelor's and master's degrees have used validation instruments in pilot initiatives to increase flexibility for adult learners (NLQF NCP, 2020).

organisations can have their standards validated against one of the NLQF levels. A sector standard used for learning or career advice in the labour market route can be registered as being at a specific NLQF level. Work is under way to create links between national and sector standards through the NLQF (Duvekot, 2019). The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of validation of competences to enable entry into sectors with shortages and the retraining of individuals who lost their jobs (NLQF NCP, 2020).

## 6.2. Credit systems

The European credit transfer and accumulation system is used in higher education, and the principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training are applied in VET.

## 6.3. Recognition of foreign qualifications

Both the NLQF and EQF levels are considered in recognising foreign qualifications.

Recognising foreign qualifications can be a challenge, as, in some cases, similar qualifications from different countries may be referenced to different EQF levels; examples of this issue with qualifications from the Netherlands, Germany and the Flemish Region of Belgium have been identified (NLQF NCP, 2019) <sup>(1)</sup>.

## 6.4. Promoting lifelong learning

The NLQF responds well to the Dutch government's focus on lifelong development, which includes actions to increase people's insight into formal and non-formal education, and the creation of preconditions to empower people in their learning and work life (NLQF NCP, 2019).

Among these actions is the public individual learning and development account (*Stimulans Arbeidsmarktpositie (STAP)*), a policy initiative to encourage adult learning, contribute to long-term employability, and create a positive and strong formal and non-formal learning culture. It refers to a subsidy (up to EUR 1 000 per year per person) that adult learners can use for educational activities listed in the STAP database. Education providers can be included in the STAP database if their offer is classified within the NLQF (Cedefop and ReferNet, forthcoming; European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Another instrument promoting participation in lifelong learning is the [Leeroverzicht](#) platform, which provides information on learning opportunities and instruments to finance them, targeting jobseekers and employees. There are plans

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<sup>(1)</sup> An exploratory study was conducted concerning German workers entering the Dutch labour market who had qualifications at a certain EQF level, but whose employers did not recognise these levels (*Source*: Internal communication with the NQFL-NCP).

to include information on the NLQF levels (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

## 7. NQF implementation and impact

### 7.1. Stage of implementation

The NLQF is operational. It has met the criteria for the activation stage of NQF development, and it is well on its way to becoming a permanent and visible feature of the national education, training and qualifications system, which will improve the transparency and comparability of qualifications. The adoption of a dedicated NLQF Act, expected soon, should give new impetus to implementation actions and strengthen the NLQF's role as a reference instrument for lifelong development.

### 7.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

EQF and NQF levels are indicated in the comprehensive NLQF database, the NLQF register of non-formal qualifications and VET qualification files, and on Europass certificate supplements and diploma supplements for some VET and higher education qualifications. NLQF levels are also indicated on non-formal qualifications included in the framework. The obligation to indicate NLQF and EQF levels on all qualification documents from formal education, and the possibility of indicating levels on non-formal qualifications, will be regulated by the new NLQF Act (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Indicating EQF levels on diplomas and certificates would support international job mobility. A substantial increase in the use of EQF levels is expected once progress is made on the levelling of international qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

### 7.3. NQF dissemination

The NCP has developed materials and tools to support providers of non-formal qualifications in the process of classification (a toolbox, validity and classification application manuals, guidelines for communication and use of the NLQF logo, and guidelines for the description of qualifications in learning outcomes) and for wider NLQF dissemination (leaflets, videos, facts and figures, etc.) <sup>(12)</sup>.

Systematic work has been carried out by the NCP informing potential stakeholders about the framework. There are information sessions on the EQF and the NLQF for different stakeholders (employers, employees, education providers),

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<sup>(12)</sup> More information (in Dutch) on these materials and tools is available on the [NLQF NCP website](#).



and a new communication plan with a focus on employers is in place. Annual meetings are taking place with policymakers, social partners, associations of education providers, and social services. A formal communication strategy is being developed (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

A conference celebrating 10 years of the NLQF was held in December 2022. It gathered education experts, ministries, trainers and employers to discuss a decade of achievements in NLQF development and reflect on the NLQF's future role in lifelong learning. A widely shared view was that the NLQF would be best served through communication targeting user groups interested in work-based learning, such as adults, workers and specific industry sectors (NLQF NCP, 2022b).

#### **7.4. Qualifications databases and registers**

Several registers have been developed for qualifications from the different education and training subsystems. Their purpose is to provide information on qualifications awarded and to build trust in the quality of NLQF qualifications. The end users are education providers, students, employers, employees and professionals in the field of education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Non-formal qualifications levelled to the NLQF are entered into the NLQF register of non-regulated/private qualifications <sup>(13)</sup>, which has been operated by the NLQF NCP since 2013. By February 2023, 207 such qualifications were included in the register.

A comprehensive database covering all qualifications with an NLQF level has been operational since 2020 <sup>(14)</sup>. By March 2023, it had been populated with 1 085 qualifications from general education and VET, and from the non-regulated education and training sector. Qualifications from higher education and preparatory secondary VET are yet to be included. The database includes a comparison function, search and filter functions (EQF and NLQF levels, field, ISCED-F), education sector, organisation granting the qualification and awarding body for the qualification, workload (hours) and ECTS), and descriptions of the learning outcomes of the qualifications <sup>(15)</sup>.

A national training portal is under development (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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<sup>(13)</sup> More information (in Dutch) on the [NLQF register](#).

<sup>(14)</sup> More information (in Dutch and English) on the [NLQF qualifications database](#).

<sup>(15)</sup> All government-regulated qualifications and most non-regulated qualifications in the database are described in terms of learning outcomes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

### **7.5. Awareness and use of the NQF**

Education and training providers are kept well informed of the NLQF through communication events, workshops and webinars. Students interested in studying abroad are also aware of the framework. There is growing awareness and use of the NLQF among workers and jobseekers due to the possibility of obtaining funding from the government and sectoral schemes for education and training programmes included in the NLQF (see Section 6.4). There is also growing interest among employers due to targeted communication campaigns. One of the latest developments is the use of EQF levels in advertisements for staff recruitment <sup>(16)</sup>. The NLQF is also used by editors of learning materials, with EQF/NLQF levels indicated in study guides. Classification in the NLQF may be required for social services to buy education programmes, and for education programmes to be funded in some sectors. Recognition authorities and bodies, and quality assurance bodies are also well informed regarding the framework. It is less well known among guidance and counselling practitioners (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The NLQF levels have facilitated reflection on the labour market relevance of certain VET qualifications as part of the government's policy on macroefficiency in VET, aiming to regulate surplus education provision (Cedefop and ReferNet, forthcoming). Through its learning outcomes orientation, the NLQF has also had a role in making the system flexible, such as in the revision of VET qualifications.

### **7.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF**

Several evaluation studies have been conducted over the years on aspects of the NLQF. These aspects include NLQF implementation and its added value; communication and marketing; and stakeholders' views on the functioning of the NLQF and the NLQF NCP, and on the potential impact of the draft NLQF Law <sup>(17)</sup>.

The most recent study (NIDAP and NLQF NCP, 2020) assessed the impact of the NLQF on participation in lifelong development, with a focus on schools, employees and employers, and sought to identify actions to increase awareness and use of the framework <sup>(18)</sup>. The main elements evaluated were the importance/relevance of the NLQF for the groups targeted, the degree to which the

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<sup>(16)</sup> According to NIDAP and NLQF NCP (2020), analysis of the use of the NLQF in job vacancies showed that the NLQF was predominantly used for vacancies in large care institutions and medium-sized industrial companies, for positions at NLQF levels 1–3.

<sup>(17)</sup> Hobéon (2013), Ockham Institute for Policy Support (2013, 2017), and Stoel and Wentzel (2014, 2015)

<sup>(18)</sup> Methods used were online interviews, and analysis of the NLQF's use in advertisements for job vacancies (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). More information is available in NIDAP and NLQF NCP (2020).

NLQF was known and the level of interest in it, the reasons for using the framework, possible actions to better disseminate it, and the functioning of the NLQF-NCP. Findings revealed the need to invest more in communication, the need to reduce the fees for inclusion of qualifications in the NLQF and to streamline the classification process, and the need to accelerate the process for the adoption of the NLQF Law. The study has strengthened the process of developing online procedures for the inclusion of qualifications in the NLQF, and facilitated the decision to focus communication efforts on employers (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

### **7.7. Impact of the NQF**

According to the Ockham Institute for Policy Support (2017), the NLQF has had an impact on the quality of non-formal qualifications through the processes of validating providers and classifying qualifications in the NLQF; in particular, applying for NLQF levelling has triggered rationalisation of intended learning outcomes, improvement of examinations and reflection on the underlying training programme. Non-formal private qualifications often have strong ‘qualifying power’ in the labour market. Their inclusion in the NLQF increases their visibility and further strengthens their value. In addition, it was suggested that, in practice, the NLQF provided a framework for linking the various training pathways, thus increasing opportunities for further learning and clarity on choices, and facilitating decisions on admissions and exemptions.

The impact of the NLQF on participation in lifelong development was evaluated by NIDAP and NLQF NCP (2020). In particular, the study looked at the NLQF’s impact on and use/awareness of the NLQF among educators, students, employers and employees, and at drivers of, incentives for and barriers to the adoption of the NLQF among trainers and employers, and among students and employees. All stakeholders surveyed believed that the NLQF offered them benefits, and educational institutions that already had qualifications levelled to the NLQF wanted to continue with the classification in the future. The NLQF was also perceived as one of the labels that granted courses access to the STAP register (see Section 6.4), thus contributing to making education more flexible and to lifelong learning, improving people’s labour market position. For schools and education institutions, the main reasons for using the NLQF was the strengthened quality of the education they could offer and their corporate identity. Employers viewed the NLQF positively as a system through which education levels can be compared and determined quickly and unambiguously. Although employers’ use of the NLQF is still limited, their use of the NLQF as a standard was highlighted as necessary for educational institutions and employees to embrace the NLQF.

Considering contemporary developments, the importance of the NLQF is seen as twofold (NIDAP and NLQF NCP, 2020):

- (a) the NLQF provides a widely accepted qualification framework to support the trend of promoting lifelong learning opportunities;
- (b) the NLQF supports education at lower levels and strengthens the lifelong learning ambitions of less-educated people, reducing the risk of segregation.

## 8. Referencing to the EQF

The Netherlands referenced its NQF to the EQF in parallel with the development of the framework. The referencing report (van der Sanden et al., 2012) was approved by the EQF advisory group in January 2012.

An updated referencing report was adopted in 2019 (NLQF NCP, 2019). It addressed the criteria and processes for classifying non-formal qualifications, the results of studies and evaluations of the NLQF and the NCP, the update of level descriptors, the development of the draft law on the NLQF, and challenges for implementation.

## 9. Reflections and plans

Just over a decade since its adoption, the NLQF has started to make a difference to the Dutch qualifications system, and is recognised as a valuable instrument for lifelong development. The framework has come to be seen as an ‘assessor of the labour market’, increasing clarity on the characteristics and value of qualifications, helping raise their value and quality, and facilitating choices for further training and recruitment of staff (NLQF NCP, 2022b).

The NLQF is open to qualifications from all education and training sectors. Its comprehensive nature is believed to underlie its usefulness, increasing transparency in the qualifications system and the comparability between qualifications obtained in formal education and training and non-formal ones (NLQF NCP, 2022b). Its success lies to a large extent with the inclusion of an increasing number of non-formal qualifications, and private providers’ growing interest in having their qualifications classified. This is partly due to enhanced and more targeted communication with labour market stakeholders, and partly due to government support of the framework and its linkage to other policies for lifelong development, such as STAP. A growing interest in offering non-regulated qualifications classified in the NLQF has also been observed among providers of regulated qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The procedures for the inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the framework are considered transparent and robust, although intensive and expensive. No influence of the COVID-19 crisis has been observed on requests for classification into the NLQF: the online meetings of the commissions continued, and attendance at online information sessions and webinars increased (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

A major milestone in accelerating the NLQF's implementation will be the adoption of the dedicated NLQF Act (expected in 2023). The act will regulate the inclusion of EQF/NLQF levels on qualification documents and the status of the NLQF-NCP as an independent body, and it will help advance targeted communication actions.

As part of the broader orientation towards flexibilisation of training and promotion of lifelong learning, work on developing microcredentials and edubadges has started through pilot schemes in higher education and VET. The NCP-NLQF is also looking into ways to classify non-formal partial qualifications at the equivalent NLQF levels (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The Dutch government sees the classification of microcredentials to NQFs and their referencing to the EQF as crucial for transparency, whether they are meant as a complement to the curriculum or valued as credentials in their own right (Government of the Netherlands, 2021). Clarifying the role that the NLQF can play in the development and use of microcredentials is considered particularly important to support low-qualified individuals. Other priorities for the near future include continuing the classification of non-regulated qualifications and streamlining classification procedures (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

## Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
HAVO	upper secondary general education [ <i>hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i> ]
MBO	upper secondary vocational education [ <i>middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> ]
NLQF	Dutch qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders
STAP	incentive for improvement of labour market position [ <i>Stimulus Arbeidsmarktpositie</i> ]

VET	vocational education and training
VMBO	lower secondary general and pre-vocational education [ <i>voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> ]
VPL	validation of prior learning
VWO	pre-university secondary education [ <i>voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i> ]

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[Central Register](#) of Vocational Training.

[Database](#) of vocational qualifications (*Kwalificaties mbo*).

NLQF qualifications [database](#).

NLQF [register](#) of non-formal qualifications.

NLQF [website](#).