

THE NETHERLANDS

European inventory on NQF 2018

Introduction and context

The Netherlands have a well-functioning education and training system, with very good performance on all key education and training indicators, reflective of a relatively high and stable level of public investment on education. The country has exceeded EU 2020 benchmarks on participation in early childhood education and care, tertiary education attainment, the employment rate of recent graduates, participation of adults in lifelong learning and the percentage of students leaving education and training early. Student performances in basic skills in reading, science and mathematics are above EU averages according to the Programme for international student assessment (PISA) 2015, though the proportion of underachievers has increased over recent years in all three domains (European Commission, 2018). Performance gaps between students are mainly related to immigrant background and to differences between schools and education tracks ⁽¹⁾. A dialogue on a national curriculum for compulsory education was initiated in 2015 and measures to increase the quality of teaching are being implemented. In higher education, the partly grant-based system was replaced with a loan system in 2015, with the aim of investing funds saved in increasing the quality of higher education. Vocational education and training (VET) performs well and is closely linked to the labour market (European Commission, 2017). An agreement between the upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*, MBO) sector and the government was signed in February 2018 aiming to improve quality in initial VET and to make continuous VET more flexible, better adjusting provision to adults' needs in terms of time, place and forms of learning. In October 2017, short-cycle programmes (two years) in the form of associate degrees were introduced as a separate level of education in higher professional education (*hogeschole*), alongside bachelor and master degrees ⁽²⁾. They are particularly suited to graduates of a secondary vocational

⁽¹⁾ At the end of primary education (age 12), Dutch students are directed to different types of secondary education based on study results and advice from school (Cedefop, 2018b).

⁽²⁾ Associate degrees had been piloted in the Netherlands since 2006. In September 2013 the qualification was formally introduced in the legal framework (revised Law on higher education and science) as a two-year segment within a four-year professional

education programme (MBO-4) and employees, extending access to higher education and offering opportunities for continuous professional development. Adult participation in lifelong learning is almost double the EU average (19.1% in 2017 compared to 10.9%) (European Commission, 2018).

Development of a national qualifications framework (NQF) for the Netherlands (*Nederlands Kwalificatieraamwerk*, NLQF) started in 2009, building on and integrating the qualifications framework for higher education which was self-certified to the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in the same year. The resulting comprehensive framework was adopted by approval of the framework proposal by the Dutch Government and the Dutch Parliament in September 2011. The NLQF national coordination point (NLQF NCP) and its tasks were also established at that time.

The NLQF is a systematic classification of all qualifications in the country, aimed at transparency and increased comparability. It has eight levels, plus an entry level below EQF level 1 and a sublevel at level 4 (4+). It covers two main groups of qualifications: government-regulated qualifications in the formal education and training system, and non-regulated (mainly) private qualifications awarded on the labour market. The NLQF is now operational. Since 2012, some progress has been made in levelling non-regulated qualifications to the NLQF, with 65 qualifications of this group included by February 2019 ⁽³⁾.

A revision of existing legal texts underpinning Dutch education and training was initiated in 2014, aiming to ensure that the role of the NLQF is reflected in the relevant legislation. Evaluations of different aspects of the NLQF and the NCP were also conducted ⁽⁴⁾. Results of the latest study (Ockham IPS, 2017)

bachelor programme, allowing entry to the labour market and further study in the related bachelor programme (Cedefop, 2014). Since 2017, associate degrees no longer need to be linked to a bachelor programme.

⁽³⁾ Register of qualifications awarded outside government regulation and levelled to the NLQF: <https://www.nlqf.nl/register>

⁽⁴⁾ (a) Ockham IPS (2013). *Implementatieonderzoek naar het NCP NLQF (Research on the implementation of the NLQF NCP)*, available in Dutch at:

https://www.nlqf.nl/images/Eindrapport_OCKHAM_IPS_definitief_29112013_NCP_NLQF.pdf

(b) Profitwise (2014). *De waarde van het NLQF - Onderzoek naar kenmerken, eigenschappen en voordelen (The value of the NLQF - Research into characteristics, properties and benefits)*, available in Dutch at:

https://www.nlqf.nl/images/downloads/De_Waarde_van_het_NLQF_-_Eindrapportseptember2014_-_ProfitWise.pdf

(c) Ockham IPS (2017). *Onderzoek NLQF (NLQF Research)*, available in Dutch at: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2017/11/20/onderzoek-nlqf>

highlighted the need to strengthen the legal basis of the framework and to widen communication among stakeholders. A legal proposal taking into account the recommendations from the evaluation is currently under development, aiming to adopt formally the NLQF, its levels and level descriptors, and to regulate the indication of NQF and EQF levels on government-regulated qualification documents. The new law on the NLQF is foreseen to be adopted in 2020.

NLQF referencing to the EQF was carried out in parallel to the development of the framework and was completed in January 2012 ⁽⁵⁾.

Policy objectives

Development of the NLQF was prompted by the 2008 recommendation on a European qualifications framework for lifelong learning ⁽⁶⁾. Its purpose is to support lifelong learning and national and international mobility of students and employees, by (van der Sanden et al., 2012):

- (a) enabling people of all ages and in different situations to identify their level of education and training, and to find an appropriate education and training programme where they can use their abilities efficiently;
- (b) enabling employers and individuals to understand the levels of existing national and international qualifications (through the EQF) and how they relate to each other;
- (c) showing how different qualifications contribute to improving workers' skills in the labour market.

The main objectives of the NLQF are to (van der Sanden et al., 2012):

- (a) increase transparency within Dutch education;
- (b) increase understanding of qualifications within Europe;
- (c) increase comparability of qualification levels;

⁽⁵⁾ van der Sanden, K; Smit, W; Dashorst, M. (2012). *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualification framework to the European qualification framework*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf

⁽⁶⁾ European Parliament and Council; Council of the European Union (2008). Recommendation of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 111, 6.5.2008, pp. 1-7. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32008H0506%2801%29>

- (d) stimulate thinking in terms of learning outcomes as building blocks of qualifications;
- (e) promote lifelong learning;
- (f) increase the transparency of learning routes;
- (g) increase understanding of qualifications levels across the labour market;
- (h) aid communication between stakeholders in education and employment.

The NLQF is thus primarily a communication framework and aims to achieve its goals by providing a systematic classification of all existing qualifications in the Netherlands, grouped in two pillars:

- (a) formal qualifications, regulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy; and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport;
- (b) non-regulated qualifications, awarded outside the formal education and training system, developed by stakeholders in the labour market (from private training providers, companies, sectors and examination bodies).

The emphasis on the double character of the national qualifications system – where private and public providers interact and supplement each other – is an important feature in NLQF-related developments. The wide range of qualifications covered in the framework reflects the recognition that lifelong learning in the Netherlands involves different education sectors and providers, using different terms and processes to describe learning outcomes, curricula and examination requirements (van der Sanden et al., 2012). The second group of qualifications, notably those awarded by the private sector, often have a strong ‘qualifying’ power in the labour market and their inclusion in the NLQF is expected to increase their visibility and further strengthen their value.

It has been explicitly stated (van der Sanden et al., 2012) that the NLQF has no role in reforming Dutch education and training, in regulating transfer and access, or in entitlements to qualifications and degrees. In the formal system, bridging between sectors and education pathways is regulated by law. Whether the framework will move from being a purely descriptive mechanism to an instrument supporting system-level developments remains to be seen. So far, NLQF implementation has led to the development of procedures for quality assurance to support the classification of non-formal qualifications (Ockham IPS, 2017), reflecting an influence of the NLQF beyond its descriptive role.

In a context characterised by the strong position of the learning outcomes approach and relatively widespread use of validation of non-formal and informal learning, the NLQF seeks to strengthen the role of validation and to turn it into an integrated part of the qualifications system. The framework is also expected to be

instrumental in the possible development of a credit system covering all education sectors (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Levels and the use of learning outcomes

The NLQF has one entry level (below EQF level 1), eight qualification levels equivalent to those in the EQF, and a sublevel at level 4 (4+). The entry level was created to support low-qualified individuals in getting a certificate/diploma and to increase their motivation to participate in further learning; however, so far this has been reserved for basic education for adults with a learning disability. Level 4+ was introduced, following prolonged discussions, to distinguish the pre-university studies (*vwo*) from the upper general secondary education (*havo*) which was classified at level 4. The possibility of inclusion of non-regulated qualifications at NLQF 5 and above was debated and initially opposed by representatives of higher education. The introduction of the associated degree as a separate level of education in higher professional education (*hogescholen*) ⁽⁷⁾ also generated debate concerning its placement at NLQF level 5. In the near future the levelling of some of the VET qualifications initially placed at level 4 may be brought under discussion and analysed to see if they may be more adequately covered by level 5 descriptors (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The following key principles are emphasised in the development of the NLQF (van der Sanden et al., 2012):

- (a) NLQF levels do not refer to, and are not defined by, education sectors;
- (b) NLQF levels are not referenced to degrees or titles (meaning, for example, that a qualification at level 6 does not automatically belong to higher education and the achievement of this qualification does not give automatic entitlement to a bachelor degree);
- (c) all NLQF levels are open to all qualifications of all education sectors;
- (d) the level of a qualification is determined based on a comparison of the learning outcomes of that qualification with the level descriptors in the NLQF and it is not tied to a particular study load ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ Please see *Introduction and context* section.

⁽⁸⁾ Initially, an application for classification and inclusion into the NLQF could be made only for qualifications requiring a substantial volume of learning, set at a minimum of 400 hours of nominal study time. This requirement was withdrawn and replaced with the labour market relevance of qualifications.

All nine NLQF levels are defined in terms of learning outcomes, using the descriptor elements presented in Table 1. Since their adoption, level descriptors of the NLQF have been tested and fine-tuned in the process of classifying non-regulated qualifications; guidelines were developed to avoid different interpretations of the descriptors when classifying qualifications. This fine-tuning work has not led to changes in the initial levelling of qualifications.

Table 1 **Level descriptor elements in the Dutch national qualifications framework (NLQF)**

Context	The context descriptions of the levels are used along with the described knowledge to determine the grade of difficulty of the skills.
Knowledge	Knowledge is the totality of facts, principles, theories and ways of working related to an occupation or a knowledge domain.
Skills	Cognitive abilities (logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical abilities (psychomotor skills in applying methods, materials, tools and instruments) applied within a given context:
<i>Applying knowledge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reproduce, analyse, integrate, evaluate, combine and apply knowledge in an occupation or a knowledge domain;
<i>Problem-solving skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognise or identify and solve problems;
<i>Learning and development skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> personal development, autonomously or under supervision;
<i>Information skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> obtain, collect, process, combine, analyse and assess information;
<i>Communication skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> communicate based on conventions relevant to the context.
Responsibility and independence	Proven ability to collaborate with others and to take responsibility for own work or study results or of others.

Source: Adapted from van der Sanden, 2012.

Table 1 demonstrates the influence of the EQF descriptors, and also some important differences resulting from an elaboration and partial reorientation of the NLQF descriptors (Cedefop, 2018). As in several other countries, making context explicit has been seen as important. The subdomains introduced for skills can be seen as a way of specifying the descriptors and making them more relevant to the Dutch context. They can also be seen as reflecting Dutch experiences in applying learning outcomes, for example in VET (upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsopleiding- mbo*) in recent years.

The learning outcomes, competence-oriented approach was broadly accepted and implemented in Dutch education and training before the development of the NLQF. The Dutch referencing report to the EQF (van der

Sanden et al., 2012) details a strong tradition of ‘objectives-led’ governance of education and training, which has proved conducive to a competence-based approach. Vocational education and training (VET) is probably most advanced in competence orientation; following extensive reform, a new VET competence-based qualifications structure has been developed and implemented; VET qualifications were revised using the NLQF level descriptors and their number was reduced. A learning-outcomes-based qualification framework for VET has been in place since 2016. The same tendencies can be observed in general and higher education, although less systematically. The introduction of the qualifications framework for higher education has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes, as has the involvement of single institutions in the ‘tuning project’⁽⁹⁾. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is supporting higher education providers to use learning outcomes related to the NLQF levels in pilot projects aimed to develop flexible partial learning pathways⁽¹⁰⁾. This is thought to aid access to and participation in higher education.

The strong position of the learning outcomes approach is reflected in widespread use of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands. The NLQF is expected to strengthen the role of validation and turn it into an integrated part of the qualifications system. Discussions have recently started on the development of an integrated credit system for all education sectors using the NLQF level descriptors (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The development of the NLQF started in 2009 and has been coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which is also the body responsible for implementing the framework. The initial structures for development and referencing of the NLQF to the EQF included: a project leader; a steering group⁽¹¹⁾; an internal working group (for policy support); an expert group (for

⁽⁹⁾ TUNING Educational Structures in Europe: <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Accreditation Organisation for Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) has developed a dedicated accreditation framework for these pilots, focusing on learning outcomes instead of input requirements. Currently, 700 programmes in 21 universities of applied sciences take part in the pilots.

⁽¹¹⁾ Comprising the directors responsible for the different education and training subsystems from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the (then) Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation.

developing and testing the NLQF level descriptors); and an NLQF-EQF committee – ‘the Leijnse Committee’ – for independent advice to the Minister of Education on the development of the NLQF, referencing to the EQF, and the tasks and structure of the NCP-NLQF (van der Sanden et al., 2012).

The NLQF proposal was adopted in September 2011 by the Dutch Government and the Parliament. The initial development of the framework included only limited stakeholder input beyond the three ministries directly involved (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, and Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport). However, two rounds of consultations on the proposals were carried out involving the main stakeholders, including social partners, policy makers and teachers and trainers from providers of both regulated and non-regulated qualifications. Given the openness of the NLQF to the private sector, systematic work has been carried out since 2012 informing potential stakeholders of the potential in the framework.

The need to strengthen the legal basis has been noted by stakeholders and a new NLQF act should be adopted in 2020. The legislative proposal for this new act was subject to a public consultation in 2015 and a follow-up consultation in 2016. A study was carried out (Ockham IPS, 2017) to inform the further development of the NLQF legal proposal and the implementation of the framework. It included a sounding board session, set up by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2018, to discuss the study results. This comprised representatives from associations of the different education sectors, social partners, other ministries, the Inspectorate of Education, the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and the umbrella organisation of providers in private education.

The day-to-day running of the framework has been delegated to a NLQF secretariat which also operates as EQF national coordination point (the NLQF/EQF NCP) ⁽¹²⁾. Initially, this was situated within the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; since 2012 it has been hosted by the CINOP foundation ⁽¹³⁾, an independent organisation funded by, and reporting to, the 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 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science); maintaining the NLQF register of non-formal

⁽¹²⁾ The website of the NLQF/EQF NCP is available at: <https://www.nlqf.nl/english>

⁽¹³⁾ The website of the CINOP foundation is available at:
https://www.cinop.nl/1_3128_About_CINOP.aspx

qualifications ⁽¹⁴⁾; maintaining and evaluating the NLQF and its links to the EQF; monitoring implementation; communicating the NLQF and supporting its main stakeholder groups.

The NCP accomplishes these tasks through its bureau ⁽¹⁵⁾, has nine part-time employees, and is supported by several independent external structures. A Programme Council decides on the classification of non-formal qualifications, based on advice from two commissions: the Quality Commission (which assesses the validity of applicant organisations, and is supported by a pool of auditors) and the Classification Commission (which makes recommendations on levelling of proposed qualifications 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 representative of the regulated education sector and one representative of the non-regulated education and training sector. An Appeal Commission has also been set up.

The NLQF builds on the qualifications framework for higher education developed (starting in 2005) in the context of the Bologna process. This culminated in the NQF for higher education in the Netherlands, which was verified by an independent external committee of peers in February 2009. The Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), guarantees implementation of the qualifications framework for higher education through the accreditation process, which is obligatory across formally recognised higher education.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁶⁾

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), called validation of prior learning (VPL) ⁽¹⁷⁾, has been in place in the Netherlands since 1998, driven by the need to bridge the gap between education supply and

⁽¹⁴⁾ The register of non-formal qualifications is available at:
<https://www.nlqf.nl/register>

⁽¹⁵⁾ The NLQF NCP Bureau comprises a programme director, three consultants, communication and project support staff.

⁽¹⁶⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update of the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al. (forthcoming)).

⁽¹⁷⁾ In Dutch: *Erkenning van Verworven Competentie* (EVC).

demand on the labour market. Initial efforts were directed at creating the circumstances for developing and implementing VPL and changing the learning culture, recognising that learning through practical experience can, in principle, deliver the same skills and qualifications as formal classroom-based learning. Quality assurance of the process came into focus in 2006, in an approach that included linkages to national qualifications, sector standards, function profiles, career paths and citizenship activities. A new national policy on validation was initiated in 2013, marked by an orientation towards a participative society where all stakeholders take ownership for their role in lifelong learning. The new policy, effective since 2016, aims to stimulate adult learning in combination with work, to broaden validation opportunities and to make VPL a successful tool for both learning and employment. For this, VPL is used as a dual instrument operating on two pathways (or routes): one linked to employability, career guidance and progression on the labour market, and the other linked to obtaining a qualification in the education system and shortening learning paths.

In the labour market route, VPL is aimed at career guidance and development for adults, to support employability, and to achieve a better match between employee capacities and occupational profiles or on-the-job learning programmes. Prior learning outcomes are validated against sector/industry standards. VPL tools used include the intake assessment, e-portfolio, the 'experience profile' (*ervaringsprofiel*), competence tests, and workplace observations/performance assessment. A formal VPL procedure carried out by an accredited VPL supplier results in the award of a 'certificate of experience' (*ervaringscertificaat*), and/or a 'certificate for vocational competence' (*vakbekwaamheidsbewijs*) linked to professional standards and competences, or a 'certificate for (generic and transferal) competences' (*competentiebewijs*) linked to human resources systems. The latter two documents were introduced in 2017 to provide labour market value in terms of skills and competences. Peer-reviewing has been introduced as a quality-assurance tool for providers of VPL for the labour market.

In the education route, the goal for the learner is to validate competences gained through non-formal or informal learning against national qualification standards, to support further learning. VPL is used to grant exemptions or to acquire partial/full formal qualifications in VET and higher education, and for entry to an education programme. Legal provisions on validation are embedded in the

legislation governing these two subsystems ⁽¹⁸⁾. In VET, the focus is on the introduction of partial qualifications and on validating prior knowledge and skills for exemptions in learning units. VET schools are supported to validate competences at NLQF levels 1-4. For higher education, VPL is mainly offered in higher vocational education (HBO) but less in universities, which usually accredit only formally acquired learning outcomes. Initiatives based on the learning outcomes approach have been piloted in higher education since 2016 to make learning routes more flexible for students in part-time and work-based learning programmes. The VPL tools used include intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, and principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). One change with the introduction of the dual validation approach refers to the ‘certificate of experience’ (*ervaringscertificaat*) awarded by accredited VPL suppliers, used to assess and recognise the vocational and general competences of a candidate in relation to sectoral or formal education standards. The ‘certificate of experience’ can be used in the VPL process in the education route, but it is no longer essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. Awarding bodies for qualifications (generally exam committees of VET schools or universities) can also use criterion-based interviews, performance assessments and other learning-independent assessment techniques. With the legal, organisational and methodological aspects in place, the focus at this stage is on turning policy into practice, increasing the quality and effectiveness of VPL services, and integrating VPL provision with use of VPL. Among the actions agreed by all stakeholders are better linking of VPL in the two routes, the development of tailored learning options and a critical review of legal frameworks for VPL. The NLQF can aid implementation of the VPL policy in the Netherlands by making relationships between labour market qualifications and formal qualifications more transparent. NLQF levels and use of level descriptors also help to clarify the wider value of people’s skills and competences than solely their performance on an occupational level. It is also possible for (sectoral) organisations to have their standards validated against one of the NLQF levels. A sector standard used for

⁽¹⁸⁾ In VET, the Law on adult and vocational education (*Wet Educatie en Beroepsvorming, WEB*, 1996) was the basis for developing the VPL policy in 1998. In higher education, the Law on higher education and scientific research (*Wet of het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek, WHW*) regulates the admission and exemption policy based on validation, with higher education institutions being free to translate and apply this regulation, depending on programme, in the rules on education and exams (*Onderwijs en examenreglementen – OERs*).

learning or career advice in the labour market route can be registered on a specific NLQF level. The next step in this process (currently in progress) is creating links between national and sector standards through the NLQF (European Commission et al. 2019).

NQF implementation

The NLQF has been operational since 2012. Initial implementation efforts were directed towards developing procedures for the classification of non-regulated qualifications, developing profiles for (and recruitment of) the necessary experts, testing procedures and criteria with stakeholders and providers of non-regulated qualifications, and developing information materials. All government-regulated qualifications have been included in the framework *en bloc* (more than 4 500 qualifications from general education, VET and higher education), and inclusion of non-regulated qualifications from the labour market has started. The criteria and procedures for inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NLQF are presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NLQF: criteria and procedures

Since 2012, the NLQF NCP has promoted the possibility to have a non-formal qualification included in, and levelled to, the national qualifications framework. This is presented as an opportunity for providers to achieve better overall visibility, to strengthen comparability with other qualifications at national and European level, to apply the learning outcomes approach, and to strengthen links to the labour market.

The basic conditions for inclusion of non-regulated qualifications into the NLQF are:

- the qualification must be written in learning outcomes;
- the qualification must be concluded with an independent, summative assessment, independent of the learning path (courses or training concluded with just proof of participation are not accepted);
- the qualification must be labour market relevant;
- the qualification must be underpinned by quality assurance.

If a private training provider, company, sector or examination body wants to submit a qualification for classification and inclusion into the NLQF, it must undergo a two-stage procedure:

- (1) validity check of provider;
- (2) classification of qualification to an NLQF level.

The validity check is a pre-condition for step 2 and aims to ensure the trustworthiness of the organisation. Issues such as legal status, property rights, the continuity of the organisation and the existence of quality assurance arrangements are checked. A list of approved quality assurance systems is included in the guidance material (e.g. accreditation by the Dutch/Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) or supervision by the Education Inspectorate). If the provider does not use externally validated systems, an on-site visit (organisational audit) is carried out. Validity is granted for five years, during which the applicant can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling. Validity is assessed by the Quality Committee, and the final decision is made by the Programme Council of the NLQF NCP, which includes all major stakeholders involved in the NLQF, including ministries and social partners.

The organisation indicates the level it sees as most appropriate for the qualification, based on comparison of learning outcomes with NLQF level descriptors. In addition, the organisation must indicate the workload, the approach to assessment/examination, and the link to the relevant occupational profile. The application for classification is assessed by two independent experts and the Classification Committee, with the final decision made by the Programme Council of the NLQF NCP. Once approved, the classification is valid for six years and the qualification is included in the NQLF register: www.nlqf.nl/register.

Organisations must pay to use the system. 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.

There has been a growing number of applications from non-formal education providers, indicative of increasing NLQF visibility outside formal education and training. By February 2019, 65 non-regulated qualifications were assigned to NLQF levels ⁽¹⁹⁾. Applications for inclusion of international qualifications into the NLQF have also been made and the Netherlands is part of a working group set up by the EQF advisory group looking into the possibilities for inclusion of international qualifications into NQFs and their referencing to the EQF.

Several qualification registers have been developed for different types of qualification. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has in place three registers for accredited education institutions and their qualifications: the Central register of vocational training (CREBO) for recognised secondary vocational education courses ⁽²⁰⁾; the Central register of higher education study programmes (CROHO) for recognised universities of applied sciences and universities ⁽²¹⁾; and the register of 'non-funded education' for accredited private schools for secondary general adult education (Vavo) ⁽²²⁾. Non-regulated qualifications levelled to the NLQF are entered into the NLQF register of private qualifications operated by the NLQF NCP ⁽²³⁾. Work on a national register taking into account all the existing databases has started. EQF and NQF levels are currently indicated in the NLQF register of private qualifications, on Europass certificate supplements and diploma supplements for VET and higher education qualifications, and in VET qualification files (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

In 2014, the Ministry of Education initiated revision of existing legal texts underpinning Dutch education and training, and the need for a dedicated NLQF law was recognised as crucial for the further development of the framework. As a result, a first draft legislative proposal was prepared in 2015, followed by two public consultations. Three evaluation studies on different aspects of the NLQF have also been conducted ⁽²⁴⁾. The most recent of these studies (Ockham IPS,

⁽¹⁹⁾ Data from the register of qualifications awarded outside government regulation and levelled to the NLQF: <https://www.nlqf.nl/register> [accessed 16.1.2019].

⁽²⁰⁾ https://www.duo.nl/open_onderwijsdata/databestanden/mbo/crebo/

⁽²¹⁾ <https://www.duo.nl/zakelijk/hoger-onderwijs/studentenadministratie/croho.jsp>

⁽²²⁾ <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0012642/2001-07-25>

⁽²³⁾ <https://www.nlqf.nl/register>

⁽²⁴⁾ (a) Ockham IPS (2013). *Implementatieonderzoek naar het NCP NLQF (Research on the implementation of the NLQF NCP)*, available in Dutch at: https://www.nlqf.nl/images/Eindrapport_OCKHAM_IPS_definitief_29112013_NCP_NLQF.pdf

2017) included an inventory of the views of key stakeholders on the current functioning of the NLQF and the NLQF NCP, and on the new draft legislative proposal; an inventory and evaluation of objections to current practices; a risk analysis of objections to implementing the NLQF legislative proposal in its current form and its impact; and recommendations for possible adjustments to the current legislative proposal and to the implementation process, to address those objections that were well-founded ⁽²⁵⁾. The conclusions of this research regarding the NLQF legal basis have highlighted the need to demonstrate better the role of the NLQF for lifelong learning and mobility, to define better some of the concepts used (e.g. 'qualification', 'learning outcomes', 'NLQF classification') and to clarify the role of the Inspectorate of Education in quality assurance of non-formal qualifications. Regarding the implementation of the framework, the study concluded that a broad communication campaign is necessary to improve instructions on how the NLQF levels can be used, and suggested small improvement of the classifying procedure.

The new NLQF law, currently under development, is expected to be adopted in 2020 ⁽²⁶⁾. The law aims to stipulate the obligation to indicate the NLQF and EQF levels on all qualification documents from the formal education system, raising the visibility of the framework among end-users. It will also formally acknowledge: the qualification levels and level descriptors of the NLQF; the generic classification of regulated qualifications; the legal status of the NLQF-NCP as an independent organisation; and the possibility of classification of non-regulated qualifications and indication of NLQF and EQF level on qualification documents issued outside the formal system. It will also provide for sanctions in the event of improper use of NLQF/EQF levels and logo by providers.

(b) Profitwise (2014). *De waarde van het NLQF – Onderzoek naar kenmerken, eigenschappen en voordelen (The value of the NLQF – Research into characteristics, properties and benefits)*, available in Dutch at:

https://www.nlqf.nl/images/downloads/De_Waarde_van_het_NLQF_-_Eindrapportseptember2014_-_ProfitWise.pdf

(c) Ockham IPS (2017). *Onderzoek NLQF (NLQF Research)*, available in Dutch at:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2017/11/20/onderzoek-nlqf>

⁽²⁵⁾ The research methods included a literature review, interviews with over thirty stakeholders, study of foreign practices, and a sounding-board session with those involved.

⁽²⁶⁾ It is aimed to present the legislative proposal to the Dutch Parliament in the second half of 2019, with the law and the corresponding general administrative order entering into force in 2020.

The NLQF NCP has been disseminating information about the framework, in line with its annual communication plan, through its dedicated website ⁽²⁷⁾, e-magazine, newsletter, leaflets, an animation film, field visits and participation in conferences and interviews. The target groups prioritised so far have been employers, sector organisations, education providers and social partners. The NLQF is known by nearly all education and training providers in the Netherlands (though it is not used by all), by recognition authorities and bodies and by labour market stakeholders at national level. It is less known among guidance and counselling practitioners, labour market actors at regional and local levels, and the general public. Recent research commissioned by the NLQF NCP on the use of the NLQF/EQF in vacancies on the labour market showed that there is minimal, yet increasing, use of NLQF/EQF levels, mainly in the south, in the healthcare sector. Similar research on the use of the NLQF/EQF for human resource management in companies will be conducted in the next three years (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

The Netherlands referenced its NQF to the EQF in parallel to the development of the framework. The referencing report was approved in the EQF advisory group in January 2012 ⁽²⁸⁾. One point of debate in the process was the proposal to reference the academically-oriented secondary education (pre-university secondary education (*vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs - vwo*)) to level 5 of the EQF. Following feedback from the EQF advisory group, the Netherlands accepted that this particular qualification should be referenced to level 4 of the EQF, but introduced a differentiation (and a sublevel) within the NQF, designating the VWO qualification as 4+.

An updated referencing report is foreseen to be presented in 2019, addressing the development of the NLQF over the past years, the results and challenges in its implementation and how it responds to the 10 EQF referencing criteria, the current structure of the NLQF-NCP, the development of the NLQF law, and the updated level descriptors.

⁽²⁷⁾ www.nlqf.nl

⁽²⁸⁾ van der Sanden, K; Smit, W.; Dashorst, M. (2012). *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualification framework to the European qualification framework*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf

Important lessons and future plans

The Dutch NQF has now reached an operational stage. Social partners recognise its added value, as well as the need to further develop and implement the NLQF, taking advantage of the momentum that has been created in the country through an overall policy context promoting lifelong learning and sustainable employability (Ockham IPS, 2017)..

While not having a regulatory function, the NLQF has started to influence developments in education and training subsystems. In VET, the NLQF descriptors were used in the revision of qualifications and work is under way to develop partial qualifications linked to the NLQF. In higher education, the use and added value of the NLQF were found to be less clear initially (Ockham IPS, 2017), mainly due to the use of different sets of level descriptors (Dublin, EQF, Bloom, NLQF). More recently, pilot projects were initiated aiming to develop flexible partial learning pathways using learning outcomes related to the NLQF levels to boost adult participation in higher education.

Although the number of non-formal qualifications included in the NLQF so far is still relatively low, interest in the framework from labour market stakeholders has been growing. In the meantime, efforts have been devoted to optimising procedures, which are now perceived as robust (Ockham IPS, 2017). The NLQF is seen as having contributed to raising the quality of non-formal qualifications. Given the importance of non-formal learning in the Netherlands and the wide range of labour market-oriented qualifications ⁽²⁹⁾, inclusion of qualifications from this group remains an important part of NLQF implementation.

While permeability between the different education and training subsystems is regulated by law in the Netherlands, the NLQF is seen as reducing barriers between sectors and institutions by increasing transparency of both regulated and non-regulated qualifications and clarifying relationships between them. This is primarily achieved through the use of learning outcomes, in a Dutch context already marked by a strong competence-based orientation, especially in VET. The framework is also seen as an aid in implementing the policy on validation of non-formal and informal learning, and it is expected to be instrumental in the future development of a credit system covering all education sectors (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

⁽²⁹⁾ In the Netherlands, 1.3 million participants take part in non-formal learning offered by more than 12 000 providers every year (NRTTO: www.nrto.nl).

One of the key challenges and points on the current agenda is the adoption of a new NLQF law to strengthen the legal basis of the framework and its levels, highlight its policy relevance and boost further implementation actions. Taking into account findings from the latest evaluation study (Ockham IPS, 2017), the new law is expected to enter into force in 2020. Another challenge is communicating the framework to a wider audience and raising awareness about the benefits of having a NLQF level indicated on certificates and diplomas. The NLQF NCP has been dedicated to increasing familiarity with the framework among employers, employees, education providers and students, and stimulating the use of the NLQF to improve transparency of qualifications. However, it has been found that, since NLQF/EQF levels are not indicated on formal qualification documents, the impact of these communication efforts has been low (Ockham IPS, 2017). The new NLQF law will specifically address the inclusion of NLQF/EQF levels on qualifications from the formal system, which is expected to raise the profile of the framework. A national communication strategy is foreseen by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, to inform the public about the NLQF in the wider context of promoting lifelong learning. It has also been suggested that communication efforts should aim to clarify the different education pathways in the Netherlands and their characteristics, rights, duties, quality assurance instruments, to minimise confusion over different types of qualifications placed at the same level (Ockham IPS, 2017).

Main sources of information:

- The EQF/NLQF NCP is hosted by the CINOP foundation:
<http://www.ncpnlqf.nl>
- NLQF register of non-formal qualifications: <http://www.nlqf.nl/register>
- Central Register of Vocational Training (CREBO):
https://www.duo.nl/open_onderwijsdata/databestanden/mbo/crebo/
- Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (CROHO):
<https://www.duo.nl/zakelijk/hoger-onderwijs/studentenadministratie/croho.jsp>
- van der Sanden, K.; Smit, W.; Dashorst, M. (2012). *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf

Dutch national qualifications framework (NLQF)

NLQF levels	Formal qualifications	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
8	Doctorate (<i>Doctoraat</i>) Designer (<i>Ontwerper</i>) Medical specialist (<i>Medisch specialist</i>)		8
7	Master degree	Social studies	7
6	Bachelor degree	Examples: Anesthetist employee (<i>Anesthesiemedewerker</i>) Certified leader excellent level (<i>Gecertificeerd leider uitstekend niveau</i>) Dialysis nurse (<i>Dialyseverpleegkundige</i>) Secondary defence formation (<i>Middelbare defensie vorming</i>) Officer Royal Military police (<i>Officier koninklijke marechaussee onderbouw</i>) Officer Navy force (<i>Officier korps zeedienst</i>)	6

NLQF levels	Formal qualifications	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
5	Associate degree	Examples: Consultant payroll services & benefits (CPB) Hotel service management Operational technician energy production technology (<i>Operationeel technicus energie productietechniek</i>) Instructor 5 (<i>Opleider 5</i>) Trainer-coach 5	5
4+	Pre-university education (<i>vwo</i>) Pre-university education for adults (<i>vavo-vwo</i>)		4
4	VET level 4 (<i>MBO 4</i>) Upper secondary general education for adults (<i>vavo-havo</i>) Upper secondary general education (<i>havo</i>)	Examples: Instructor 4 (<i>Opleider 4</i>) Airport service agent Application training food technology (<i>Applicatie opleiding levensmiddelentechnologie</i>) Industry diploma all-round beautician (<i>Branchediploma allround schoonheidsspecialist</i>) Industry diploma medical pedicure (<i>Branchediploma medisch pedicure</i>)	4
3	VET level 3 (<i>MBO 3</i>)	Examples: Dog grooming (<i>Hondentoiletteren</i>) General investigator (<i>Algemeen Opsporingsambtenaar</i>) Swimming teacher (<i>Zwemonderwijzer</i>) Trainer-coach 3 Industry diploma pedicure (<i>Branchediploma pedicure</i>)	3
2	VET level 2 (<i>MBO 2</i>) Basic education 3 for adults (<i>vavo</i>) Pre-vocational secondary education - theoretical pathway (<i>vmbo tl</i>) Pre-vocational secondary education - combined theoretical pathway (<i>vmbo gl</i>) Pre-vocational secondary education - advanced vocational pathway (<i>vmbo kb</i>) Basic education 3 for adults (<i>Basiseducatie 3</i>)	Military police security (<i>Marechausseebeveiliging</i>) Assistant swimming teacher (<i>Assistent zwemonderwijzer</i>) Sales employee (<i>Verkoopmedewerker</i>)	2

NLQF levels	Formal qualifications	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
1	VET level 1 (<i>MBO 1</i>) Pre-vocational secondary education - basic vocational pathway (<i>vmbo bb</i>) Basic education 2 for adults (<i>Basiseducatie 2</i>)		1
Entry level	Basic education 1 for adults (<i>Basiseducatie 1</i>)		

(*) Non-regulated qualifications awarded by organisations outside the formal education and training system and relevant for the labour market (e.g. from private training providers, companies, sectors and examination bodies), included in the NLQF following quality assurance procedures. The 'size' of these qualifications varies. The NLQF register for non-formal qualifications: <http://www.nlqf.nl/register>

Source: Adapted from van der Sanden, K. et al., 2012. Additional information: https://www.nlqf.nl/images/downloads/Artikelen/NLQF_Brochure_Engels_2018_site.pdf and <http://www.nlqf.nl/register>

Abbreviations

ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
EVC	validation of prior learning [<i>Erkenning van Verworven Competenties</i>]
Havo	upper secondary general education [<i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i>]
HBO	higher professional education [<i>Hoger beroepsonderwijs</i>]
MBO	upper secondary vocational education [<i>middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i>]
NLQF	qualifications framework for the Netherlands
NQF	national qualifications framework
Vavo	general secondary education for adults [<i>Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs</i>]
Vmbo	lower secondary general and pre-vocational education [<i>Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i>]
VET	vocational education and training
VWO	pre-university secondary education [<i>Vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i>]

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