NORTH MACEDONIA
European inventory on NQF 2018

Introduction and context

North Macedonia ([1]) became an EU candidate country in December 2005 and is currently being screened to start EU accession negotiations by June 2019 (ETF, 2018). The country has registered positive trends in recent years, such as a significant increase in tertiary education attainment (reaching 32.9% in 2018), and a reduction in the rate of early leavers from education and training (7.3% in 2018). With respect to other ET 2020 benchmarks, such as participation of adults in lifelong learning, participation in early childhood education and care, share of 15-year-olds with low achievement in reading, mathematics and science, and employment rate of recent graduates, the country is situated far below EU averages ([2]). Labour market indicators have shown gradual improvements since 2005, and in 2018 the unemployment rate (15 to 64 years old) reached a historical low level (21.1%). Youth unemployment (15 to 24 years old) is, however, still high, at 47.6% in 2018 ([3]), and there is a particularly high gender gap in activity and employment rates ([4]).

Reforms have been underway in all parts of the education and training system. Significant improvement in transition to higher levels of education and training has been facilitated in the past decade through a number of education policies, such as making secondary education compulsory for all, streamlining progression routes of graduates from three-year VET programmes to four-year

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([1]) Throughout this report, official national documents carry the internal denominations 'Republic of Macedonia/Macedonian', and not the EU officially designated 'former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia' or 'Republic of North Macedonia'/'North Macedonian' (as of 15.2.2019).

([2]) Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/eu-benchmarks [accessed 20.3.2019].

([3]) World Bank Group; Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (2019). *Western Balkans: labour market trends 2019.* http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/351461552915471917/pdf/135370-Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2019.pdf

([4]) Government of the Republic of Macedonia (2017). *Employment and social reform programme 2020.* http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/word/esrp_dokumenti/ESRP%20Macedonia%20-%20final%20(ENG).pdf

VET programmes giving access to higher education, and stimulating participation in higher education (ETF, 2018).

The development of a national qualifications framework (NQF) has been closely linked to the country's strategic priority of achieving EU membership, and its commitment to the Lisbon strategy, the Europe 2020 strategy, the Bologna process, and the Copenhagen/Bruges process. It has been supported by international assistance. Higher education has been subject to extensive change in line with the Bologna principles; amendments to the law on higher education in 2010 ([5]) introduced learning-outcome-based study programmes. The strategy for vocational education and training in a lifelong learning context 2013-20 ([6]) has also boosted the work on the North Macedonian qualifications framework (NMQF) and its implementation.

The initial idea for the development of a NQF started in 2002 under the programme for vocational education and training ([7]). In September 2005, the proposal for development of a national qualifications framework was prepared by a working group of national experts ([8]) supported by the ETF. Subsequently, development work focused on the NQF for higher education, a political priority at the time. The higher education qualifications framework (NQF HE) was adopted in 2010 ([9]), setting a basis for further development.

Aiming to finalise the concept and to complete a draft law for a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning – the NMQF – the NQF working group led by the Ministry of Education and Science was re-established in November 2012. Building on the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF), the Copenhagen process, the Bologna process, and the decree on the national framework for higher education qualifications, the resulting document outlining the basic concept of the NMQF – *Macedonian qualifications framework: starting bases* – was adopted in July 2013 ([10]) following a public debate.

([5]) Law on higher education. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia,* No 115/10.

([6]) Strategy for vocational education and training in a lifelong learning context and action plan 2013-20. http://www.csoo.edu.mk/images//vet%20strategy_en%20-%20final.pdf

([7]) Contract No 02-0003, second phase, CARDS.

([8]) ETF project: *Developing strategies for national qualifications frameworks for south-eastern Europe (2004-05).*

([9]) Decree on the national framework for higher education qualifications. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia,* No 154, 30.11.2010. http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Appendix_1_Decree_for_the_NQF_HE.pdf

([10]) *Macedonian qualifications framework: starting bases* (March, 2013). http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/MRK-Basicline-1.pdf

The law on the NMQF for lifelong learning ([11]) was adopted in November 2013 and its application started in September 2015. The comprehensive NMQF has eight levels, with levels 5 to 7 split in two sublevels each, and covers qualifications from all education and training subsystems, as well as those acquired through non-formal learning. It was referenced to the EQF and self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in February 2016.

Policy objectives

The primary roles of the NMQF are communication, transparency and support to reforms. It helps to coordinate and integrate all stakeholders by taking into consideration the needs of the labour market, society and individuals. It provides a transparent description of all qualifications in the national system of education, and enables recognition of qualifications acquired in the country and abroad. The NMQF is seen as a valuable reform tool for modernising education and training, with a view to improving the quality and adaptability of education to labour market needs, and promoting lifelong learning and mobility. It is reflected in several strategic documents, such as the Economic reform programme 2018-20 ([12]), the Education strategy 2018-25 ([13]), the Employment and social reform programme 2020 ([14]) and the Framework for strategic engagement of employers in Northern Macedonia ([15]).

([11]) Law on national qualifications framework. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 137/2013 and 30/2016.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NQF-LAW_MKD-EN_rev-final-1.pdf

([12]) Ministry of Finance (2018). *Economic reform programme 2018-20* (in English).
https://www.finance.gov.mk/files/Macedonia_ERP_2018.pdf

([13]) Education strategy for 2018-2025 and Action plan.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategija-za-obrazovanie-ENG-WEB-1.pdf

([14]) Government of the Republic of Macedonia (2017). *Employment and social reform programme 2020* (in English).
http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/word/esrp_dokumenti/ESRP%20Macedonia%20-%20final%20(ENG).pdf

([15]) British Council; IME (2017). *Framework for strategic engagement of employers in Northern Macedonia.*
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ramka-za-stratesko-vklucuvanje-na-rabotodavaci.pdf

The *Economic reform programme 2016 report* ([16]), which included a measure for the implementation of the NMQF (Measure 18: Education and qualifications for all), highlighted the framework as 'a trigger for a change of attitudes and values on education and qualifications, benefitting individuals, the society and the labour market' (ETF, 2018). Findings of the *Inventory and analysis of qualifications* (ETF, 2016), carried out in cooperation with the ETF to support the EQF referencing process, have been used to inform reforms in VET and higher education qualifications (ETF, 2018). In 2016 the country engaged in development of a new generation of vocational education and training (VET) qualifications aligned with the NMQF. The associated quality-assurance processes are intended to improve credibility and transparency of NMQF qualifications. They include evaluation and approval of qualifications for inclusion in the framework and accreditation of institutions to deliver and/or award these qualifications. The NMQF is also used as a base for developing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The main policy objectives listed in the law on the NMQF ([17]) are to:

(a) define learning outcomes;

(b) establish a system for valuing different qualifications within the overall qualifications system;

(c) encourage and promote lifelong learning;

(d) demonstrate clear links between different parts of the education and training system;

(e) indicate transfer and progression (horizontally and vertically) across and within all types of education and training (formal, non-formal and informal);

(f) enable international comparability of qualifications;

(g) promote the importance of key and professional competences;

(h) ensure mobility of participants in education and training and inclusion in the labour market at national and international levels;

(i) create a single system for quality assurance;

(j) balance quality of service providers;

(k) ensure cooperation of all stakeholders;

([16]) Republic of Macedonia (2017). *Economic reform programme 2016.*
https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/18777/economic-reforms-programme-2016-2018_en

([17]) Law on national qualifications framework. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 137/2013 and 30/2016.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NQF-LAW_MKD-EN_rev-final-1.pdf

(l)   ensure harmonisation with national economic, social and cultural needs;

(m) be part of the developments related to the EQF.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

Qualifications are classified into the NMQF according to type, level, sector, and volume. The framework is comprehensive and includes two types of qualification: educational qualifications from all education sectors (general education, VET, higher education), and vocational qualifications that can be acquired for part of a formal education programme (modules, courses), by completing a special programme in adult education, or through validation of non-formal learning [18]. The NMQF has eight levels, of which levels 5 to 7 have two sublevels each. Only educational qualifications enable vertical progression in the formal education system. Passing the state *matura* exam is the main condition to access higher education (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016).

Level descriptors are defined in terms of expected learning outcomes: knowledge and understanding, skills and competence. They were elaborated taking into account the EQF level descriptors, the Dublin descriptors for levels 6 to 8, the characteristics of national education and training levels, and strategic national priorities. Different dimensions of learning and capabilities are taken into account, such as applied knowledge, practical skills, working with others, autonomy and responsibility, creativity and innovation, and complexity of context.

The decision to use sublevels at levels 5 to 7 was legally adopted [19], but is seen as transitional. It reflects the specificities of the education and training system, and requirements of employers (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016). The different sublevels at the same level of the NMQF include qualifications of different types and size, differentiated in terms of number of

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[18] Vocational/occupational qualifications attest competences relevant for the labour market presented within one or more occupational standards. The achieved learning outcomes are documented with a certificate. These qualifications aim to enable employment and personal development. By their nature, they, in principle, do not enable vertical progression in the formal education system (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016). These qualifications are under the responsibility of the Adult Education Centre, and the awarding body is the Ministry of Education. They can be awarded at levels up to 5B.

[19] Decree on the national framework for higher education qualifications and law on national qualifications framework.

credits. Pre-Bologna qualifications posed the main challenge in levelling ([20]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The volume of qualifications is expressed in credits, using three credit systems. The European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) is used for higher education qualifications at levels 5A to 8, the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) for VET qualifications at levels 2 to 5B, and the North Macedonian credit system for general education (NMCSGE) for primary and general secondary education. ECTS has been applied to all three cycles of higher education since 2005. Implementation of ECVET and the NMCSGE is yet to be achieved.

The law on the NMQF stipulates the mandatory elements of qualification standards: title and type of qualification, level or sublevel, qualification code, credit value, description of qualification (measurable indicators of learning outcomes relating to the acquired knowledge and understanding, skills and competence) and contents (entry requirements, number of mandatory and optional subjects, assessment methods and criteria for assessment of learning outcomes) ([21]).

The shift to learning outcomes is seen as an essential part of qualifications development and one of the leading principles outlined in the law on the NMQF. Other principles include transferability of credits, classification of qualifications at levels and sublevels, comparability with the EQF, and quality assurance in the development and acquisition of qualifications. Several documents were produced to support the development of qualifications and their allocation in the NMQF: *Procedure for development of qualifications; Format of qualifications; Protocol for cooperation among the stakeholders involved in the process of NMQF* and *Methodology for including qualifications in NMQF* ([22]).

As of 2010, higher education institutions have revised all programmes to comply with the learning outcomes approach, according to the decree for the

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([20]) The status of pre-Bologna qualifications is temporary. They are levelled formally by law but not included in the register, which includes only qualifications that respect all quality assurance criteria. The pre-Bologna diploma of higher education is included at NMQF level 6 and pre-Bologna master of science degree at level 7, unlike in other ex-Yugoslav countries where they are included at levels 7 and 8, respectively.

([21]) Law on the MQF, Article 6. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia,* No 137/2013.

([22]) Documents are available at: http://mrk.mk/?page_id=73&lang=en

national framework for higher education qualifications ([23]). This reform was linked with legal requirements for quality assurance and all higher education study programmes were subject to restructuring and reaccreditation. At present, learning outcomes are transferable across higher education programmes, with some sporadic difficulties (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

However, analysis of qualifications and relevant legislation carried out in 2014-15 (ETF, 2016) revealed that the laws on primary education, secondary general education, VET and adult education require further updating to introduce and strengthen the learning outcomes approach throughout the education system. Switching from educational goals to learning outcomes has been noted as one of the main challenges for NMQF implementation, especially in regard to existing qualifications; at the same time it is recognised that development of the NMQF has influenced to a large extent the promotion and use of learning outcomes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). Reform of three- and four-year VET programmes and adult education in line with the NQF is in progress. Reformed four-year technical education consists of 45% general education and 55% vocational theoretical and practical education. Curricula are based on learning outcomes and teaching focuses on the integration of vocational theory with practical classes or exercises; work-based learning is included in the curriculum and starts in the third year (ETF, 2018).

In adult education, verified non-formal training programmes are designed using learning outcomes and are linked to occupational standards. Qualifications acquired via non-formal learning can be located at levels 1 to 5B in the NMQF, according to their level of complexity. A total of 410 verified programmes for adult education are currently available. The Employment Service Agency is an important user of these programmes, in the framework of active labour market measures.

([23]) Decree on the national framework for higher education qualifications. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 154, 30.11.2010. http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Appendix_1_Decree_for_the_NQF_HE.pdf

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The NMQF was formally adopted in 2013. The law on the NMQF ([24]), that came into effect in 2015, defines the principles and goals of the framework, its structure, levels and level descriptors, its governance and the roles of stakeholders in the qualification system.

The Ministry of Education and Science has had overall responsibility for developing the NMQF and for EQF referencing; it is the EQF national coordination point (EQF NCP). It has a coordinating role shared with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which proposes the development of qualifications, adopts occupational standards and is responsible for setting up a system for collecting information on labour market needs and changes in required competences.

Two working groups were established for the development of the NMQF (one in 2012 and one in 2014) ([25]), and one for the preparation of the referencing report to the EQF ([26]). In 2015, awareness and involvement of stakeholders in matters related to the NMQF increased through a series of actions: establishment and staffing of the NQF unit within the Ministry of Education and Science, launch of the NMQF website, establishment of the National Board for the NMQF, and establishment of sectoral qualifications councils.

The National Board for the NMQF, created in October 2015, ensures the involvement of stakeholders in framework governance. Its role is to evaluate education, employment and regional development policies, to help forge links between education and the labour market, to propose development of qualifications and decide on their allocation in the NMQF, to set up and supervise the sectoral qualifications councils; it also has a monitoring and methodological

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([24]) Law on national qualifications framework. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 137/2013 and 30/2016. http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NQF-LAW_MKD-EN_rev-final-1.pdf

([25]) Both working groups included representatives of: Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Centre for Adult Education, VET Centre, Bureau for Development of Education, Employment Service Agency, State Statistical Office, Ministry of Information Society and Public Administration, Chamber of Commerce, Organisation of Employers and Chamber of Crafts.

([26]) Including representatives of: Ministry of Education and Science, academia, Board for Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education, VET Centre, Centre for Adult Education, Bureau for Development of Education, National Examination Centre, State Educational Inspectorate, National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility, VET school, Student Union, Organisation of Employers and the Chamber of Crafts.

role. It has two representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science and one from each of the following: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, VET Centre, Centre for Adult Education, Bureau for Development of Education, National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility, higher education, the chambers, the Organisation of Employers, and the Independent Union for Education, Science and Culture.

The mandate of sectoral qualifications councils is to analyse labour market trends, propose and promote qualifications in a particular sector or subsector, evaluate current qualifications and propose priorities in developing new ones, give opinions on the compliance of assessment standards with occupational and qualification standards, and establish commissions for assessment and validation of non-formal learning. Their members represent the Ministry of Education and Science, the ministry responsible for the sector, the Association of Employers from the relevant sector, the Trade Union in the sector, universities, the VET Centre, the Centre for Adult Education, the Bureau for Development of Education, and the relevant body for regulated professions. By February 2018, five of the 16 planned sectoral qualifications councils were established by the National Board in sectors considered of national priority: construction and geodesy; electro-technical; chemistry and technology; hospitality and tourism; and personal services (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

The institutions responsible for the development of qualifications at levels 1 to 5B are the VET Centre, the Centre for Adult Education and the Bureau for Development of Education. Higher education institutions are responsible for qualifications at levels 5A to 8.

Employers are also involved in the development of occupational and qualification standards and VET education programme design. In higher education, boards for trust and cooperation with the public have been established at faculty level, including representatives from the academic community (professors and students), from employers, chambers, and relevant associations. One of their tasks is to review the relevance of study programmes with reference to their learning outcomes and qualification levels. Cooperation between specific stakeholders involved in the qualifications system has also been formalised through a series of protocols designed by the National Board for the NMQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ([27])

Development of a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in North Macedonia has been referred to in legislation and policy documents concerned with adult education since 2005 ([28]). Building a VNFIL system is one of the development principles outlined in the 2013 law on the NMQF ([29]), linked to the aims of including qualifications resulting from all types of education and training in the framework, promoting lifelong learning and indicating possibilities for transfer and progression. A 2015 concept paper for non-formal adult education and informal learning, developed by the Centre for Adult Education with support from the ETF, provided a basis for further policy developments. The *Roadmap for implementing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning* ([30]) was adopted in 2016, setting out measures that became integrated in the new education strategy for 2018-25 ([31]), the strategy on adult education for 2019-23 ([32]) and the concept document on lifelong learning.

Two substantial methodological documents were developed in 2017 – the *Guide note on VNFIL processes* and the *Handbook for assessment in the context of validation of non-formal and informal learning* ([33]) – and governance arrangements for developing the VNFIL system were put in place. The Ministry of Education and Science and the Centre for Adult Education are the leading

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([27]) 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).

([28]) The National programme for the development of education for 2005-15, the 2008 law on adult education, the Strategy on adult education 2010-15, and the Strategy for development of vocational education and training in a lifelong learning context 2013-20.

([29]) Law on national qualifications framework. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 137/2013 and 30/2016.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NQF-LAW_MKD-EN_rev-final-1.pdf

([30]) *Roadmap for implementing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning.* http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/VNFIL-Roadmap_angl-1.pdf

([31]) Education strategy for 2018-25 and action plan.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategija-za-obrazovanie-ENG-WEB-1.pdf

([32]) Strategy on adult education for 2019-23 [in Macedonian].

([33]) CAE; ETF (2017). *Guidance note on VNFIL processes* [unpublished].
CAE; ETF (2017). *Handbook for assessment in the context of validation of non-formal and informal learning* [unpublished].

institutions; the Ministry has overall policy responsibility and is the accrediting body for institutions providing VNFIL services, while the Centre for Adult Education provides coordination, technical and capacity-building support. Other stakeholders involved are the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the VET Centre – responsible for developing and revising qualification and occupational standards, assessment requirements and related documentation for VNFIL processes – the National Board for the NMQF – managing the sectoral commissions, and directing the design and development of qualification standards – and the sectoral qualifications councils, with a role in developing and revising qualification standards. Two dedicated structures for VNFIL were established to carry out and monitor the actions outlined in the Education strategy for 2018-25 in order to establish the VNFIL system by 2020: a working group on validation and a coordinating body. They are tasked with drafting the remaining legislation, designing quality assurance mechanisms, and developing a plan for implementing validation processes.

A draft legal act containing the main principles and provisions for setting up and implementing the VNFIL system has been developed in 2018. Once this is adopted, related legislation will need to be harmonised. The validation process will cover the four stages identified in the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ([34]): identification, documentation, assessment and certification; validation providers will need to meet the criteria for all stages to be accredited.

According to the draft legal act, validation will be possible only for vocational qualifications included in the NMQF. Qualifications awarded in formal VET include both a vocational and a general education component, and general education qualifications can only be awarded through formal education. The law on higher education ([35]) stipulates that higher education qualifications may be awarded via VNFIL, but quality assurance regulations are yet to be adopted.

The target groups for piloting validation services until 2020 will be prioritised in the sectors with highest labour demand. They include individuals without basic (primary) education; those without qualifications but with relevant skills and

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([34]) Council of the European Union (2012). Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1-5. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29

([35]) Ministry of Education and Science (2018). *Law on higher education.* http://mon.gov.mk/images/documents/zakoni/ZAKON_VISOKOTO_OBRAZOVANIE-final.pdf

competences acquired outside the formal labour market; the unemployed and those wishing to return to the labour market after breaks from employment; employees participating in on-the-job training and/or continuing professional development for career advancement purposes; and persons returning to the country with relevant skills and knowledge acquired abroad.

The main obstacles to implementing the VNFIL system so far have been limited engagement of stakeholders, including social partners and some public institutions, and the remaining necessary legislation that is still to be adopted.

NQF implementation

The NMQF has reached an early operational stage. The law on the NMQF [36] was adopted in 2013 and entered into force in September 2015. It defines the principles and goals of the framework, its structure, levels, sublevels and level descriptors, mandatory elements of qualification standards, volume and types of qualifications, as well as quality assurance aspects and institutional roles. Institutional arrangements for implementation are in place and inclusion of qualifications has started. Qualifications that were given priority were those in VET – in particular those in tourism and hospitality, electronics and IT, agriculture and civil engineering, personal service, chemical and technology; post-secondary qualifications (EQF level 5); and vocational qualifications acquired outside formal education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). At present, the NMQF includes (ETF, 2018):

(a) all qualifications from accredited higher education programmes;
(b) all qualifications from general education;
(c) reformed three-year VET qualifications, which have been defined in learning outcomes, notably those designed in 2012-13 (within an IPA Twinning project with Slovenia);
(d) all qualifications from four-year VET programmes and three-year VET programmes not yet reformed are included conditionally, pending their revision in line with Article 6 – 'Standards of qualifications' – of the NQF law;
(e) qualifications from verified non-formal adult education programmes.

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[36] Law on national qualifications framework. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 137/2013 and 30/2016.
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NQF-LAW_MKD-EN_rev-final-1.pdf

Funding for the functioning and capacity-building of structures concerned with the framework has been shared between national and international sources (ETF, 2018). The ETF supported the referencing of the NMQF to the EQF (2014-15), capacity building for stakeholders, revision and analysis of qualifications, and levelling of a small number of VET qualifications using learning outcomes. NMQF implementation was also supported by the British Council, with emphasis on employer engagement with NMQF development, and the establishment of sectoral qualifications councils (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016). An IPA twinning project – *Further improvement of the system for development and implementation of the national qualifications framework* – was launched in March 2016, aimed at activities for review of NQF-related legislation; strengthening institutional capacity; and development of qualifications in line with the NQF. Other specific projects aimed to continue reforms of three- and two-year VET qualifications ([37]) by developing new qualification and occupation standards, reforming curricula and strengthening cooperation between stakeholders and VET teachers. Projects also supported the modernisation of post-secondary education ([38]); cooperation between higher education institutions and the business community ([39]); and building capacity of the EQF national coordination point (EQF NCP) and other relevant stakeholders ([40]).

The *Roadmap for further development and implementation of the NMQF* ([41]) was put forward in 2016. It contains eight work packages designed to tackle specific challenges: further conceptual development; NMQF governance and stakeholder involvement; implementation of learning outcomes; setting up a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning; inclusion of qualifications into the NMQF; quality assurance of qualifications; review and updating of related legislation; and monitoring of NMQF implementation in line with the Roadmap. The activities of the first phase have been implemented with ETF support (ETF, 2018).

([37]) IPA project *Enhancing lifelong learning through modernising the vocational education and training and adult education systems*.

([38]) IPA project *Support to the modernisation of the system for post-secondary education*.

([39]) IPA project *Cooperation between higher education institutions, private sector and relevant public bodies*.

([40]) Erasmus + grant (2016).

([41]) A revised version of the *Roadmap for further development and implementation of the MQF* highlighting the actions completed by January 2018 is available at:
http://mrk.mk/?page_id=918&lang=en

A comprehensive inventory of qualifications was created in 2015 in cooperation with the ETF, as a first version of a qualifications register. It covered all formal qualifications from higher education, general education and VET, and the verified non-formal adult education programmes ([42]). The qualifications register ([43]) has been under development since 2016 (ETF, 2018), with 30 qualifications at levels 2, 3 and 5 listed in the register by April 2019.

NQF and EQF levels are indicated in the qualifications register, and on Europass diploma supplements. It has been agreed to include NQF and EQF levels on qualification documents for all qualifications in the NMQF; implementing this decision in all education and training subsystems will, however, take time, as it is technically challenging and requires updating of legislation. A bylaw that stipulates the indication of levels on higher education qualifications was adopted in June 2018 ([44]), and draft laws for primary and secondary general education and VET are currently under debate; their adoption is expected in 2019. For general education and VET, the design of the new learning-outcomes-based education programmes and the levelling of existing ones is still work in progress (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

According to the EQF NCP (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018), there is a medium- to high-level of awareness about, and use of, the NMQF among education and training providers. Large companies and recognition bodies are aware of the framework and use it to a medium extent, and guidance and counselling practitioners to a low to medium extent. The NMQF is less visible among pupils, parents, small and medium-size companies and job-seekers. Communication efforts are oriented towards employers, learners, education providers and authorities. The main channels used are the NMQF website ([45]), leaflets, brochures, workshops, information campaigns, and, occasionally, TV and radio channels. The important role of the communication dimension of the NMQF is recognised and a series of protocols for cooperation among

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[42] The inventory includes 241 qualifications from general education, formal VET, non-formal verified programmes, qualifications in the aviation sector, as well as other qualifications. A small number of higher education qualifications (43) were integrated in the inventory, complementing the 1 147 already listed in the register of higher education qualifications (elaborated with support of a Tempus project) (ETF, 2018).

[43] Available in Macedonian at: https://registar.mrk.mk

[44] *National Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*, No 102, 1 June 2018.

[45] NMQF website: http://mrk.mk/?lang=en

stakeholders involved in the qualifications system, adopted by the NQF Board, serve as a basis for a future communication strategy ([46]).

As the NMQF is a young framework, no systematic evaluation of its use or impact has yet been carried out. Based on experiences so far, the framework has influenced to a large extent the promotion of the learning outcomes approach; the review, renewal and quality assurance of qualifications; and dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders across education and training sectors and between education and the labour market. The NMQF is used to support the recognition of foreign qualifications and is seen as a catalyst for setting up a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The main challenges so far in implementing the framework included the establishment of NQF-related structures, switching from educational goals to learning-outcomes-based education programmes for existing qualifications, insufficient interest of employers to become more deeply involved in implementing the framework, and the implementation of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) and the Europass certificate supplement for VET. Direct engagement of employers, the inclusion of international qualifications, and the evaluation of the NMQF have been noted as challenges to be tackled in the future (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

A comprehensive report on referencing of the NMQF to the EQF and self-certification to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016) was presented and endorsed in the EQF advisory group in February 2016. The report is published on the NMQF website and the EQF portal ([47]). An updated report on progress with

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([46]) Aims and principles of the future communication strategy include: identifying all relevant actors and sectors to be involved, including social partners; interactivity and sustainability; enhancing communication between the different education and training subsystems and between the formal and non-formal sectors (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

([47]) Ministry of Education and Science (2016). *EQF referencing report of the Macedonian qualifications framework and self-certification to the QF-EHEA.* https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-

the implementation of the framework is expected in 2020 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Important lessons and future plans

The entry into force of the law on the NMQF, the establishment of the National Board of the NMQF, staffing of the NQF Unit within the Ministry of Education and Science, and the endorsement of the referencing report in the EQF advisory group were important milestones in the development of the North Macedonian framework. A qualifications register was set up and inclusion of qualifications in the register started in December 2017. The NMQF is now an integral part of the qualifications system, seen as an important reform tool embedded in several strategic policy documents. Given this reforming role, it is natural that the further development and implementation of the framework is taken forward in stages.

The Education strategy for 2018-25 ([48]) identified the further development and sustainability of the NMQF as a national priority, acknowledging a number of challenges. Legislation in related areas needs to be aligned with the law on the NMQF, procedures for including qualifications in the NMQF and in the qualifications register need to be improved, and further efforts are needed for qualifications to become more responsive to the needs of the labour market and of individuals. Qualification and occupational standards and curricula also need to be revised using the learning outcomes approach, and qualification standards need to be developed for higher education. Preparatory work for setting up a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning has reached an advanced stage, but it is recognised that the system is in its embryonic phase. Institutional capacity for effective management of the NMQF needs to be enhanced, including all relevant stakeholders. Insufficient involvement of stakeholders representing the labour market and a need to take labour market information more into account in future phases of NMQF implementation have been signalled by international experts involved in the referencing process and remain a challenge.

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eqf/files/eqf_referencing_report_of_the_macedonian_qualification_framework_and_self-certification_to_the_qf-ehea.pdf

([48]) The Education strategy for 2018-25 and the action plan are available at: http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategija-za-obrazovanie-ENG-WEB-1.pdf

A systematic approach to addressing these challenges was adopted with the development of the *Roadmap for further development and implementation of the MQF* in 2016. Ensuring the financial and human resources for the functioning of the newly established NQF structures, and ensuring coordination and coherence of the different lines of action set out in the roadmap and of the multiple projects aimed at reforming VET qualifications in line with NMQF principles, are factors that will impact the extent to which the NMQF will be successfully implemented (ETF, 2018).

Main sources of information
[URLs accessed 27.3.2019]

• The Ministry of Education and Science is the EQF NCP: http://www.mon.gov.mk/
• NMQF website: http://mrk.mk/?lang=en
• NMQF register: https://registar.mrk.mk
• Ministry of Education and Science (2016). *EQF referencing report of the Macedonian qualifications framework and self-certification to the QF-EHEA.*
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/eqf_referencing_report_of_the_macedonian_qualification_framework_and_self-certification_to_the_qf-ehea.pdf

North Macedonian qualifications framework (NNMQF)

NMQF levels		Educational qualifications (formal)	Vocational qualifications (*)	EQF levels
8		Doctorate diploma		8
7	7 A	Second cycle master of science diploma (from 60 to 120 ECTS)		7
	7 B	Second cycle diploma for specialist studies (60 ECTS)		
6	6 A	First cycle university diploma (240 ECTS) First cycle vocational diploma (240 ECTS)		6
	6 B	First cycle university diploma (180 ECTS) First cycle vocational diploma (180 ECTS)		

NMQF levels		Educational qualifications (formal)	Vocational qualifications (*)	EQF levels
5	5 A	Short cycle higher education (vocational) diploma (*uverenie*)		5
	5 B	Post-secondary diploma for specialist education (*diploma za specijalistichko obrazovanie*) Craftsman diploma (*diploma za majstorski ispit*)	Vocational certificate (CVET)	
4		Upper secondary general education diploma Upper secondary technical diploma Upper secondary arts diploma	Vocational certificate (CVET)	4
3		Vocational diploma (three years) (*diploma*)	Vocational certificate (CVET)	3
2		Vocational certificate (two years) (*uverenie za struchno osposobuvanje*)	Vocational certificate (CVET)	2
1		Certificate of primary education (*svidetelstvo*)	State certificate for adult education (literacy and numeracy skills)	1

(*) According to the law on the NMQF, vocational/occupational qualifications can be acquired for part of a formal education programme (modules, courses), by completing a special programme in adult education, or through validation of non-formal learning.
Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education and Science, 2016.

Abbreviations

ECTS	European credit transfer and accumulation system
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
NMCSGE	North Macedonian credit system for general education (*Makedonski kredit system za opshto obrazovanie*).
NNMQF	North Macedonian qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

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[URLs accessed 19.4.2019]

European Commission and Cedefop (2018). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: country report: North Macedonia.*

European Training Foundation (2018). *Inventory of NQF in North Macedonia.*
https://connections.etf.europa.eu/wikis/home?lang=en#!/wiki/Wf591e43b607e_4ccf_8d94_a3256a255147/page/The%20former%20Yugoslav%20Republic%20of%20Macedonia%20-%20NQF%20Inventory

European Training Foundation (2016). *Inventory and analysis of existing qualifications: study supporting the EQF referencing process: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: synthesis report 2016.*
http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Inventory_Analysis_NQF_Eng.-1.pdf

Ministry of Education and Science (2016). *EQF referencing report of the Macedonian qualifications framework and self-certification to the QF-EHEA.*
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/eqf_referencing_report_of_the_macedonian_qualification_framework_and_self-certification_to_the_qf-ehea.pdf