

BELGIUM (Flanders)

European inventory on NQF 2014

Due to the State's federal structure, Belgium is facing challenges of developing and implementing more than one national qualifications framework (NQF). The federal state comprises three regions (Flanders, Walloon region and Brussels-capital region) and three communities (Dutch-, French- and German-speaking). Education is delegated to community level, giving each community wide responsibilities for financing and organising their respective education, training and qualifications systems.

While the Dutch- and French-speaking communities have been working on national frameworks since 2005-06, the German-speaking community started developing its own qualifications framework (*Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft*) (QDG) only recently, the decree establishing the QDG having been adopted by the parliament in 2013. In the development phase, the Dutch- and French-speaking communities have been following different pathways, reflecting the substantial institutional and political differences in education and training between the two.

Despite adaptation to each specific context, all three frameworks present substantial similarities. Further, an amendment to the Belgian Federal Law on general structure of the education system was adopted in 2012, stating that European qualifications framework (EQF) levels will be used as a common reference for the three communities in Belgium, addressing the challenge of linking the three frameworks, and potentially easing mobility of Belgian citizens within the country. At this stage, however, all three frameworks will be referenced separately to the EQF.

Introduction

On 30 April 2009 the Flemish Parliament and Government in Belgium adopted an Act on the Qualification Structure (*kwalificatiestructuur*) (Government of Flanders, 2009) ⁽¹⁾ introducing a comprehensive qualifications framework. The framework,

⁽¹⁾ The Flemish Community of Belgium is responsible for education and training policy and legislation in the Flemish region and for Dutch-speaking education institutions within the Brussels-capital region. The Flemish qualification structure is a classification of Flemish qualifications using an eight-level qualification framework.

based on an eight-level structure described in two main categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility, was formally referenced to the EQF in June 2011. To be put into practice, however, the original 2009 Act required additional political and legal clarifications. Most remaining issues were addressed during 2011, paving the way for a six-month pilot phase from autumn 2011. Actual implementation of the framework started January/February 2012 and has gained speed since then. The Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) can now be deemed fully operational. Compared to most other countries, qualifications are assessed individually (as opposed to 'block-wise' placement). This is clearly time and resource demanding, but can strengthen credibility of the framework.

The road from formal adoption to implementation has proved more time-consuming than originally predicted. These delays have partly been caused by a need for further legal instruments (implementation decrees on professional as well as educational qualifications), and partly by negotiations with the social partners on how to link and level professional qualifications to the framework. The March 2014 update of the European qualifications framework (EQF) referencing report (Government of Flanders and AKOV, 2014), reports on significant progress during 2013 and 2014; by mid-2014 approximately 120 professional qualifications will have been included in the framework. The number of educational qualifications is now also increasing.

Main policy objectives

The 2009 Act on the qualifications structure defines the Flemish qualification system as '[...] a systematic classification of recognised qualifications based on a generally adopted qualifications framework (FQF)'. The qualification structure (including the qualifications framework) aims at making qualifications and their common relations transparent, so that stakeholders in education (students, pupils and providers) and the labour market (social partners) '[...] can communicate unambiguously about qualifications and the associated competences' (2009 Act on the qualifications structure, Chapter I, Article 3).

The act underlines that the qualification structure (including the qualifications framework) should act as a reference for quality assurance, developing and renewing courses, developing and aligning procedures for recognising acquired competences, and for comparison (nationally and at European level) of qualifications. Quality assurance of pathways leading to recognised qualifications is being followed up by the Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming) (AKOV).

This agency now covers all types and levels of qualification, except higher education qualifications at levels 5 to 8 and is crucial to overall credibility and success of the overarching framework, domestically as well as at European level (in relation to the EQF) ⁽²⁾. For qualifications at levels 5 to 8 a joint accreditation organisation has been set up with the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie) (NVAO).

Stakeholder involvement

The FQF process has involved a broad range of stakeholders at all stages, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training. Other relevant ministries (Ministry of Labour and Social Economy and Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media) have also been involved. From the education and training side, participation of relevant sectors (general education, initial vocational education, continuing vocational education and training, higher education, including short-cycle higher education) has been important.

The link and overlap ⁽³⁾ between professional and higher or general educational qualifications has been a challenge and involvement of stakeholders representing different levels and types of qualifications has been important. A qualification framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process was developed and put in place (2008). The relationship between the two framework initiatives was discussed throughout the development process and the 2009 Act takes this into account in its terminology, framework descriptors and procedures.

Framework implementation

The road from adoption to implementation and operational status has proved to be complex for the Flemish NQF.

First, transformation of the 2009 Law into practice required further legal steps and introduction of a series of 'implementation decrees': a decree covering

⁽²⁾ In October 2014, following Belgian federal and regional elections, it became clear that AKOV will be discontinued. It is now not clear how this will influence future work on the qualifications framework.

⁽³⁾ This overlap results because professional qualifications are integrated into educational qualifications, outside higher education at levels 6 to 8. It is acknowledged that further alignment between professional and educational qualifications is needed.

professional qualifications at levels 4 and 5 came into force in January 2012 and gave a mandate to start linking these professional qualifications to the FQF. A second and third decree – covering professional qualifications above level 5 and educational qualifications levels 1 to 4 – came into force in 2014. These legal amendments have made it possible to put in place precise and detailed procedures for placing and including qualifications in the framework.

Second, clarification of the social partners' role in relation to linking professional qualifications to the framework was needed and required substantial effort to be resolved. Flemish professional qualifications are developed within a tripartite system giving the social partners, in the Flanders' Social and Economic Committee (SERV) a decisive role. All professional qualifications build on competence standards defined and approved by the social partners. Professional qualifications have to reflect these competences and no single qualification can be approved without input and approval from the social partners. The 2009 Law did not specify how the social partners contribute to levelling qualifications so it was necessary to agree on how to approach this task. A general agreement between the government and SERV on how to proceed was reached in 2011 and provides the basis for the ongoing process. In January 2014, a total of 116 professional qualifications had been included in the framework. A total of 30 qualifications were at that stage considered for inclusion. A further 100 professional qualifications were also under development and will be considered for inclusion at a later stage.

While time-consuming and challenging, continuing inclusion of professional qualifications in the FQF can be deemed a success as it demonstrates that stakeholders are fully involved and responsible for implementation of the framework. The Flemish approach is also interesting as it demonstrates how competence standards developed for occupational purposes are being translated into professional qualifications. Whether it is possible to continue this process for professional qualifications above level 5 remains to be seen and will demonstrate whether the opening up – in principle – towards professional qualifications at levels 6 to 8 can be translated into practice.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The term 'competence' plays a significant role in Flemish education, training and employment policies and is used as an overarching concept. Competence and learning outcomes are used as interchangeable terms in education and training.

Descriptors

The FQF is based on an eight-level structure described by categories of knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility. Compared to the EQF, FQF descriptors are more detailed, in particular for lower levels. A main difference is the FQF does not use 'competence' as a separate descriptor category but considers it as an overarching term and uses it interchangeably with learning outcomes. A main feature of the Flemish framework is use of 'context' as an explicit element of the descriptors. The context in which an individual is able to function is seen as an important part of any qualification. This can be seen as a criticism of EQF descriptors which contain contextual elements, but fail to treat them explicitly.

Descriptors are used to describe two main categories of qualifications: professional and educational. A professional qualification is based on a set of competences allowing an individual to exercise a profession and can be achieved both inside and outside education. An educational qualification is based on a set of competences an individual needs to participate in society, start further education and/or exercise professional activities. An educational qualification can only be acquired through education and in institutions recognised by the Flemish authorities. The distinction between professional and educational qualifications is applied for all eight levels of the framework; this offers potential for high-level qualifications in parallel with traditional academic institutions.

Learning outcomes and competences

Progress on practical implementation of principles of learning outcomes/competences has made progress in recent years. The VET sector is probably the most experienced in this field. A competence-based approach is well integrated, referring to professional requirements in the labour market. Use of competences in initial VET in recent years has been inspired by Dutch developments (in particular the upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) (MBO) reform). Discussions between SERV and the government in 2010 and 2011 on implementing the framework can be seen as part of this process; how can occupational competence standards be translated into learning outcomes-based professional qualifications and then attributed a level in the FQF? Learning outcomes are also present in general education, for example in setting learning objectives in national core curricula. Developments in higher education have been influenced by the Bologna process, but are mainly dependent on initiatives taken by single institutions or associations of higher education institutes. While reflecting a diverse situation, a clear shift to learning outcomes has taken place in recent years in Flanders.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

In Flanders, the term *Erkennen van Verworven Competenties* – recognition of acquired competences (RAC) – is used to refer to validation of non-formal and informal learning. RAC can be used to gain admission to an education and training programme, to request exemptions from (parts of) the study programme and to obtain a work experience certificate. Each sector, education, work, culture, sports have their own policies for RAC and thus, arrangements in each sector differ. A concrete step in development of an integrated policy was approval of the NQF and its subsequent implementation that aims at integrating different systems for validation. There has been increased cooperation between sectors and willingness to create a single framework linking validation processes to the Flemish qualifications structure. The NQF describes eight levels of qualifications that can be obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning. Since 2011, departments of education and training, work and social economy and culture, youth, media and sports started discussing development of an integrated approach towards RAC, based on qualifications from the NQF.

A secondary school diploma can be obtained through an exam committee if not finished within the prescribed years. A process for recognising non-formal and informal learning has been in place in universities and university colleges since September 2005. Each institution elaborates its own rules of procedure. Procedures result in proof of acquired competences (*bewijs van bekwaamheid*) which can then lead to appropriate exemptions/shortened study duration and credit certificates and/or a proof of qualification. There are also exams for people over 21 to access higher education, although there is debate if this constitutes RAC of the secondary school diploma or not.

On formal education, the Flemish Decree of 15 June 2007 defines exemptions linked to modular organisation of educational programmes. All programmes (modules) at centres for adult education are developed based on course profiles approved by the Flemish Government. Centres for adult education provide an evaluation for each module. Exemptions can be granted based on credits for prior learning and/or evaluation of competences.

Arrangements set up by the departments essentially aim at recognition of non-formal and informal learning through a ‘certificate of work experience’ (*Ervaringsbewijs*) created by a decree approved on 30 April 2004. People can receive a certificate of work experience if they demonstrate they have acquired the skills needed to perform an occupation. Professional competence profiles are translated into standards by SERV and the social partners. Although certificates of work experience are granted by the government, they are, at this stage, not

equivalent to a diploma. While awaiting a new integrated framework (RAC based on the NQF), certificates of work experience services will be continued.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF was completed in June 2011 (Government of Flanders and AKOV, 2011). The referencing process was coordinated by AKOV. AKOV is also the EQF national coordination point for Flanders. The Flemish government decision to reference to the EQF in mid-2011, pending placing professional qualifications in the FQF, was discussed by the EQF advisory group. Lack of clarity in professional qualifications made it difficult for other countries to judge how Flemish qualifications compared to their own. Taking this criticism seriously, an updated referencing report was submitted in March 2014 ⁽⁴⁾. This report responds to the points made by the EQF in 2011 and provides a detailed overview of developments since then. Following implementation of FQF during 2012 and 2013, these levels are now filled with qualifications. It should be noted that numbers of qualifications at each level are changing continuously.

Table 1 **Level correspondences established between the FQF and the EQF**

FQF	EQF
Level 8	Level 8
Level 7	Level 7
Level 6	Level 6
Level 5	Level 5
Level 4	Level 4
Level 3	Level 3
Level 2	Level 2
Level 1	Level 1

Source: Government of Flanders and AKOV, 2011.

⁽⁴⁾ The Flemish referencing report update has yet (October 2014) to be formally presented to the EQF advisory group.

Important lessons and the way forward

Although there is a long tradition in Flanders and Belgium of involving stakeholders and social partners in education and training policy and legislation, development and implementation of the FQF required extensive dialogue with all stakeholders. Given progress made in the past two years, this delay seems now to have been turned into a strength. Acceptance and involvement of social partners in implementation of the framework provides a good basis for future developments.

The FQF can be seen as one of the first new European NQFs – established in response to the EQF – now reaching full operational stage. While far from complete, the Flemish process illustrates the long-term character of NQF developments.

Main sources of information

Government of Flanders, 2009.

AKOV acts as national contact point <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/wegwijs/AKOV/#> [accessed 22.10.2014].

Table 2 **Belgium-Flanders qualifications framework**

NQF levels	Educational qualifications	Professional qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctor	Recognised professional qualifications	8
7	Master (January 2014, 55 included) Master after master (January 2014, two included)	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, one included)	7
6	Professional bachelor (January 2014, 19 included) Academic bachelor (January 2014, 21 included) Bachelor after bachelor (January 2014, six included)	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, one included)	6
5	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, two included)	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, 17 included)	5
4	Upper secondary general education Technical secondary education (third stage) Artistic secondary education (third stage) Supplementary general adult education	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, 38 included)	4
3	Secondary vocational education, second year/third stage	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, 41 included)	3
2	Adult basic education Second stage of secondary vocational education	Recognised professional qualifications (January 2014, 18 included)	2
1	Primary education		1

Source: Adapted from Government of Flanders and AKOV, 2014.

List of abbreviations

AKOV	Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming [Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training]
EQF	European qualifications framework
FQF	Flemish qualifications framework
MBO	middelbaar beroepsonderwijs [upper secondary vocational education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVAO	De Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie [Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders]
RAC	recognition of acquired competences
SERV	Flemish Social and Economic Committee
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 29.9.2014]

Government of Flanders (2009). *Flemish Act of 30 April 2009 on the qualifications structure.*

http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/files/DecreetVKS_ENG.pdf

Government of Flanders; AKOV (2011). *Referencing the Flemish qualifications framework to the European qualification framework.*

http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/european-qualifications-framework/koppelingsrapport-vks-eqf/files/Koppelingsrapport_EN_2014-FINAAL.pdf

Government of Flanders; AKOV (2014). *Referencing the Flemish qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework. Update of the referencing report July 2011 [unpublished].*