

BELGIUM (French community)

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

The French community of Belgium has been working on a NQF in reference to the EQF since 2006. Three distinct political authorities are involved in the work:

- (a) the French community (consisting of inhabitants of the French-speaking area of the Walloon region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels);
- (b) the Walloon region;
- (c) the French Community Commission in the Brussels-Capital region (Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale) (COCOF).

Responsibility for compulsory, adult, and higher education lies with the French community, while the Walloon region and the COCOF are responsible for continuous vocational training in their respective areas. Work on a qualifications framework for higher education, linked to the Bologna process, has been going on in parallel. Although the idea of an NQF (and its link to the EQF) received support, how to integrate the qualifications framework for higher education within a comprehensive NQF has been much debated and has delayed the process.

The current proposal dates from 2010 when the three governments of the French community agreed on the principle of creating a qualifications framework with double entry, one for educational qualifications and one for professional qualifications, placed into eight levels and consistent with descriptors of the EQF. The proposed framework structure is close to that applied by the Flemish community. All major stakeholders agreed in mid-2011 on these main principles of the framework. An expert working group has been responsible for preparing a draft referencing report, which was presented to the EQF advisory group in December 2013.

Full implementation of the framework requires that progress is made on adoption of the legal basis. The legislative process has been delayed from the original deadline of early 2014. This means that the framework has yet to move into an operational stage.

Main policy objectives

Development of the French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie*) (CFC) is seen as an integral part of evolution of the existing education and training system, to improve overall transparency and collaboration, easing mobility and supporting individual learning pathways for citizens.

The CFC is an important instrument for strengthening use of learning outcomes and for referencing to the EQF, but it is neither seen as an instrument for reform of existing institutions and structures, nor is it perceived as having any regulatory role. At this stage of development it has been decided to include only qualifications delivered by public providers; however, a possibility of considering opening up later to other qualifications is mentioned in the 2013 referencing report.

Stakeholder involvement

French-speaking Belgium's three executive bodies (French community, Walloon region and COCOF) initiated CFC development and established an expert group for the preparatory work. This group includes representatives from all levels of education and regional bodies for vocational training. In future, national coordination point (NCP) responsibilities will lie with a steering and positioning authority yet to be established.

The NQF initiative can be divided into two distinct phases; before and after 2010. While the period before 2010 was characterised by high-quality technical work, lack of clarity over higher education's role in the comprehensive framework created tension and caused delays. The process was revitalised after 2010 and a new steering group was set up, including stakeholders from general education (at all levels and of all types, including universities) and vocational/professional education and training (including social partners). Four technical working groups were established, to work on writing level descriptors, positioning of qualifications in the framework, on linking the framework to quality assurance arrangements, and communication. The results were shared among all stakeholders, and recommendations of these groups were followed up by decisions at intergovernmental level.

Division of the framework into two main strands – educational and professional qualifications – has implications for stakeholder involvement. The French service for trades and qualifications (*service francophone des métiers et qualifications*) (SFMQ) will play a key role in defining and positioning professional qualifications at levels 1 to 4. The SFMQ is well placed to play this role as its overall task is to develop occupational profiles based on input from the social partners and in collaboration with employment services. Its role is also to develop training profiles with reference to these occupational profiles, in close liaison with education and training providers. The Academy of Research and Higher Education (Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur) (ARES) will be responsible for defining and positioning educational qualifications at levels 6 to 8. ARES and SFMQ will share responsibility for qualifications at level 5, reflecting an extensive 'mix' of professional and educational qualifications at this level.

Framework implementation

A 2008 decree introduced a higher education qualifications framework for the French community. This work is still in progress and self-certification to the European higher education area (EHEA) is pending.

Introducing the distinction between educational and professional qualifications has been instrumental in bringing the NQF process forward. This distinction will make it possible to open professional qualifications at higher levels without questioning universities' autonomy and their responsibility in relation to bachelor, master and doctorate awards. The procedures for this inclusion of higher level professional qualifications are still being discussed. Using one set of level descriptors for all levels and both types of qualifications has gradually won acceptance by the different stakeholders and will, in the longer term, make it possible to look more carefully into how these two strands can interact with each other.

Legal adoption of the CFC is still (mid-2014) pending, and concrete qualifications have yet to be placed in the framework. A steering and positioning authority will be created, as a responsible authority for implementation and follow-up of the CFC, including positioning qualifications. The delay has clearly slowed down progress and is for the moment hindering the CFC to move into an early operational stage.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

An eight-level structure has been designed, using two blocks of terms: knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility. The descriptors developed by the Flemish qualifications framework have been used as a basis, but adjusted according to conditions of the region. For levels 5 to 8, descriptors are designed based on the Dublin descriptors.

The CFC development process is seen as part of recent and continuing reforms, and the shift to learning outcomes is central in this change. Progression in use of learning outcomes is described in the recent referencing report.

In higher education, a guide has been produced, to help higher education institutions define their learning outcomes to fit into common competence reference systems. Autonomy of universities means that the decision to apply learning outcomes has to be made by the institution itself, resulting in varying approaches. There is little information on extents of actual use of learning outcomes, apart from in university colleges. Here, the new competences reference systems are gradually being implemented.

In compulsory education and training, a competence-based approach is well established. Learning outcomes are described in terms of *socles de competences* and *competences terminales*. For adult education (including higher education short cycles, bachelors and masters) the term used is *capacités terminales*.

In vocational education and training (VET), work is continuing to define and describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, to meet the need for shared reference systems for VET. Since 2010, regional continuous vocational education and training (CVET) providers have developed a common procedure of certification (recognition of prior learning (*reconnaissance des acquis de formation*) (RECAF)), based on common standards and common standards for assessment, with a competence-based approach. The SFMQ is playing a particularly important role as regards learning outcomes, both for initial VET (vocational compulsory education) and CVET (education for adults and public providers of vocational training in Wallonia and Brussels). Descriptions of qualifications are based on the job profiles (professional standards) defined by the social partners. Common training profiles are then defined by providers. These profiles are declined in units of learning outcomes compatible with the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) specifications.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF ⁽¹⁾

Two terms are used in the French-speaking community of Belgium to refer to validation of non-formal and informal learning: validation and valorisation. Validation refers to a possibility of obtaining a recognised title or certification, while valorisation of experience refers to procedures that allow access to education and granting credits for prior experience. Validation is used in the so-called system of validation of competences (*validation des compétences*) in continuous vocational training. This provides a certificate, *titre de compétences* which is a legal document, recognised by the Walloon region, French community and COCOF. It can be used to obtain a qualification and it also holds value in the labour market. At the moment there is discussion on how these *titres de compétences* will be linked or not to the NQF and EQF. Valorisation of experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*) (VAE) relates to adult education (*enseignement de promotion sociale*), universities and higher education (*hautes écoles*). These four, validation of competences and three VAEs, constitute four different systems governed by different legal frameworks, guidelines and procedures.

⁽¹⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

The standards for validation are now the same as those in the formal system. SFMQ is responsible for drawing up these standards. They are based on occupation standards elaborated by social partners (*profils metiers*), and corresponding training standards (*profils de formation*) elaborated by education and training stakeholders. The different training providers (initial and continuous education) and the validation of competences consortium are supposed to base their programmes on using the profiles drawn up by SFMQ as common reference standards. They are expressed in learning outcomes and a system of units compatible with ECVET. Qualification and training profiles are developed in close consultation with sector representatives and the unions. These profiles specify the competences required for each occupational profile, with associated indicators.

Discussions continue on how the four systems can be further integrated and how to create bridges between them. The four different systems are working together in four areas:

- (a) statistics: looking into what indicators can be used and carrying out impact analysis of validation practices;
- (b) network of researchers: a network of people at universities or other bodies interested in and doing research on validation issues;
- (c) common portfolio: creating a common online way of recording all the learning experiences;
- (d) common guidance: common guidelines are developed that can be used for all the four systems.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF is an integral part of the overall work on the NQF, and for French-speaking Belgium, the referencing process is ongoing. A NCP for EQF referencing was established in September 2010. Once established (following legal adoption of the framework), the steering and positioning authority will take on these responsibilities.

The draft referencing report (referencing the CFC to the EQF) was presented to the EQF advisory group in December 2013. The report encompasses a thorough description of the education and training system in French-speaking Belgium, an account of the context and development of the CFC, and a section on how the CFC and adjoining development processes and responsibilities meet the 10 referencing criteria. There is no overview of where the concrete qualifications are to be placed in the CFC so far, reflecting the

ongoing process of legal formalisation, but plans for the positioning and implementation process are described.

Table 1 **Level correspondence between the CFC and the EQF**

CFC	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: Malarme, 2013.

Important lessons and future plans

Adaptation of the legal basis for the CFC is now of critical importance. Postponement of this process means that qualifications are yet to be included in the framework and the new steering and positioning authority is still not operational. Plans have been made for information and communication regarding the framework, including a database of all positioned qualifications.

Development of the CFC demonstrates importance of finding a workable link between higher education and other forms of education and training. Distinguishing between educational and professional qualifications at all levels has been instrumental in making progress. Whether this structure can be used to open up future developments of professional qualifications at higher levels and establish stronger links between educational and professional sectors remains to be seen.

Different systems of modules and units in the subsystems and institutions are described in the referencing report, but little information is available on how the systems work across levels and subsystems. It remains a challenge to convey the possible learning pathways that follow non-traditional routes. Another challenge is defining and describing in detail the relationship between

the CFC and the already established higher education qualifications framework for the French community.

Main sources of information

The NCP was set up under the responsibility of SFMQ:
<http://www.sfmq.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1435> [accessed 29.9.2014].
Malarme, 2013 (see list of references).

List of abbreviations

ARES	Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur [Academy of Research and Higher Education]
CFC	Cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie [French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning]
COCOF	Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale [French community commission in the Brussels-capital region]
CVET	continuous vocational education and training
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EEA	European economic area
EQF	European qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QDG	Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft [qualifications framework German-speaking community]
RECAF	Reconnaissance des acquis de formation [recognition of prior learning]
SFMQ	Service francophone des métiers et qualifications [French service for trades and qualifications]
VAE	validation des acquis de l'expérience [valorisation of experience]
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 29.9.2014]

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014: country report Belgium (FR)*.

http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2014/87048_BE_FR.pdf

Malarme (ed.) (2013). *Report on referencing the French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning* [unpublished].