

FRANCE

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

The setting up, in 2002, of the National Committee on Vocational Qualifications (CNCP) and the National Register of Vocational Qualifications (RNCP) signalled the establishment of the French national qualifications framework. Supported by the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE)*), the French framework can be seen as belonging to the first generation of European qualifications frameworks. While more limited in scope than the new comprehensive NQFs now developing throughout Europe, in its focus on vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, its regulatory role is strong and well established.

Several stakeholders consider the existing five-level structure dating back to 1969 to be in need of replacement, possibly by an eight-level structure more closely aligned with the EQF. It is, for the moment, unclear when a new structure could be put in place.

The framework was referenced to the EQF in October 2010, using the original five-level structure. The EQF levels, and their alignment with the five-level structure, are clearly indicated in databases as well as in certificate and diploma supplements. A new referencing report will be submitted as soon as a revised structure is in place.

Main policy objectives

The French NQF, as defined by the RNCP, covers all vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications, including all higher education qualifications with a vocational and professional orientation and purpose ⁽¹⁾. The framework covers three main types of qualification:

⁽¹⁾ The RNCP currently covers more than 6 000 qualifications published in the Official Journal; 1 260 of these are 'old' certificates no longer awarded. Since October 2012, degrees in higher education consist of: 870 masters; 323 *titres d'ingénieur* (master); 160 *licences générales* (bachelor); 1 523 *licences professionnelles* (professional bachelors); 1 280 qualifications at EQF Level 5 (including higher education short cycles): 117 *brevets de technicien supérieur* (BTS), (2011) 29 BTSA (same thing in the field of agriculture), (2011) 43 DUT (*diplômes universitaires technologiques*).

- (a) those awarded by French ministries (in cooperation with the social partners through a consultative vocational committee (CPC));
- (b) those awarded by training providers, chambers and ministries but where no CPC is in place;
- (c) those set up and awarded by social partners under their own responsibility.

To be registered in the RNCP, a qualification should aim at national coherence and strengthen the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. All qualifications registered in the RNCP must be possible to acquire through validation of non-formal and informal learning. Registration signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the CNCP, underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary for:

- (a) receiving funding;
- (b) financing validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (c) exercising certain professions and occupations;
- (d) entering apprenticeship schemes.

The French NQF has more limited scope than the comprehensive NQFs now being developed throughout Europe. Its focus is strictly on vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications and it does not include certain qualifications from general education, notably primary education and general upper secondary qualifications (the general *baccalaureate*).

The French NQF is defined by its labour market focus, the framework responding to a situation where candidates increasingly find themselves without jobs after finishing education and training. Recent policy initiatives and reforms have emphasised the need to give higher priority to employability and having candidates better suited to the labour market. Education and training providers (including universities) have been obliged to reformulate and clarify their qualifications, also in terms of labour market relevance using the same qualifications descriptors (skills, knowledge, competence). This movement towards employability has been present in French policies since 2006.

While there is increasing emphasis on employability and competences for the qualifications forming part of the responsibility of the CNCP, this principle is only partly applied for general education at primary and upper secondary level.

Stakeholder involvement

Belonging to the first generation of European frameworks, the French NQF is fully operational. It is a regulatory framework playing a key role in the overall governance of education and training systems, in particular for vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications. While emphasising the importance of

transparency (for example by integrating the Europass tools), the framework directly influences access and progression in the system as well as funding and quality assurance issues. The number of qualifications covered by the CNCP has been steadily increasing in recent years, with part of this growth being in vocationally and professionally oriented higher education qualifications, notably at EQF levels 5 and 6.

CNCP is a platform for cooperation between all ministries involved in design and award of qualifications (education, higher education, labour, social affairs, agriculture, culture, youth and sports, defence, finance) and for the social partners and other relevant stakeholders (such as chambers) in coordinating the French qualifications system and framework. This broad involvement is seen as necessary (both for technical and administrative reasons) to capture the diversity of qualifications in France, but also for reasons of credibility and ownership. CNCP is also entitled to be informed about any vocational qualification created by social partners, even in cases where there is no intention to place them in the national register.

Framework implementation

The role of the CNCP as ‘gatekeeper’ of the French framework is important: no qualification can be included in the official register without its approval. The strength of the CNCP lies in its openness to public and private providers and awarding institutions. The procedures and criteria developed and applied by the CNCP for this purpose are of particular interest to those countries currently implementing new (and open) NQFs. Any institution (public or private) wanting to register a qualification must respond to the following main issues:

- (a) legal basis of the body (or network of bodies) awarding the qualification;
- (b) indication of procedures if the awarding institution discontinues its activity;
- (c) description of tasks addressed by the qualification;
- (d) link to ROME (Register of occupations in the French labour market);
- (e) the competences (learning outcomes) related to these tasks;
- (f) competences (learning outcomes) to be assessed;
- (g) mode of assessment;
- (h) relationship to existing qualifications in France and abroad;
- (i) composition of the assessment jury;
- (j) link to validation.

The French experience since 2002 illustrates the need for NQFs to evolve continuously to stay relevant. One of the issues currently being addressed is the

question of opening up to the development of qualifications at what would correspond to EQF level 2. Until now there has been agreement between public authorities and social partners that vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications (falling within the mandate of the CNCP) should only be developed and awarded from level 3 and upwards. This position has been defended by the trade unions in particular, fearing that opening up to vocational qualifications at lower levels could threaten existing labour market agreements. The current crisis in the economy, with increasing youth unemployment, may lead to reconsideration of this approach. Technical work continues, looking at possible competence requirements for level 2 qualifications, using the experience of neighbouring countries like Luxembourg and Germany as reference.

The French Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP) published a survey (CIEP, 2014) on whether stakeholders are aware of qualifications frameworks (in public administration, in public as well as in private education and training institutions, among employers and among recruiters) ⁽²⁾. The following main findings are of interest: 79% of those asked were aware of the French framework, 53 and 45% of the respondents answered that they lack knowledge of the EQF and QF-EHEA (qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area). The survey shows that employers generally lack understanding of the frameworks and seem to attribute relatively little priority to them, though only 273 stakeholders were contacted and only 91 responded, reducing the overall value of the survey.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The original five-level structure introduced in 1969 was used as the basis for referencing the French framework to the EQF in 2010.

The French qualification system has developed considerably since these levels were agreed in 1969, so development and introduction of a more detailed structure of level descriptors is seen as necessary. In 2011, the National Council of Statistics (CNIS) commented on the need for a new level structure (CNCP, 2010) by stressing that it '...would like to see these reflections lead to a new classification of certifications that take into account changes in the structure of qualifications and the links set up within European higher education.'

⁽²⁾ This survey formed part of an international comparison where also stakeholders in eight other European countries were asked the same questions.

Table 1 **Levels in the French national qualifications framework**

Level	Level definition	Learning outcomes
V	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational studies certificate (BEP) or the certificate of vocational ability (CAP) and, by assimilation, the level 1 certificate of vocational training for adults (CFPA).	This level corresponds to full qualification for carrying out a specific activity with the ability to use the corresponding instruments and techniques. This activity mainly concerns execution work, which can be autonomous within the limits of the techniques involved.
IV	Personnel holding jobs at a supervisory highly skilled worker level and able to provide proof of a level of training equivalent to that of the vocational certificate (BP), technical certificate (BT), vocational <i>baccalaureate</i> or technological <i>baccalaureate</i> .	A level 4 qualification involves a higher level of theoretical knowledge than the previous level. This activity concerns mainly technical work that can be executed autonomously and/or involve supervisory and coordination responsibilities.
III	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training equivalent to that of a diploma from a university institute of technology (DUT) or a technology certificate (BTS) or a certificate corresponding to the end of the first higher education cycle.	A level 3 qualification corresponds to higher levels of knowledge and abilities, but without involving mastery of the fundamental scientific principles for the fields concerned. The knowledge and abilities required enable the person concerned to assume, autonomously or independently, responsibilities in design and/or supervision and/or management.
II	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training comparable to that of a bachelor or master degree.	At this level, exercise of a salaried or independent vocational activity involves mastery of fundamental scientific principles for the profession, generally leading to autonomy in exercising that activity.
I	Personnel holding jobs normally requiring a level of training above that of a master degree.	As well as confirmed knowledge of the fundamental scientific principles for a specific vocational activity, a level 1 qualification requires mastery of design or research processes.

Source: French National Council of Statistics (CNIS), 1969.

Although it is likely that a seven- or eight-level structure will be chosen (based on technical work carried out so far), it is now unclear when a new draft structure could be presented. A particular issue is how the new structure will link to occupational standards, notably the national ROME and the international ISCO. The discussion is also closely related to the question of whether qualifications corresponding to EQF levels one and two will play any role in the future. This latter question is linked to labour agreements and negotiations on minimum wages and is particularly complicated.

In contrast to the use (to now) of the 1969 level structure as a basis for the French framework, there is a common policy on learning outcomes (expressed as 'competence') covering the entire (vocationally and professionally oriented) education and training system. This approach is broadly accepted within initial vocational education and training, and gradually so by institutions operating at higher levels of education and training. The approach was strengthened by the 2002 law on validation of non-formal and informal learning (VAE) and its emphasis on learning outcomes as the basis for awarding any kind of certified qualification.

The learning outcomes approach has only been partially introduced in higher education. Traditionally, university qualifications have been input-based and very much focused on knowledge and research. The new law of August 2009 (*Loi sur les responsabilités et libertés des universités*) creates the obligation for universities to set new services dedicated to employability. This law requires universities to improve their learning outcomes descriptions, both for employers and students.

The learning outcomes descriptions form the basis on which higher education qualifications are approved by the CNCPE, a process which has to be renewed every four years. The Ministry of Higher Education and Research has issued (September 2012) detailed criteria for writing learning outcomes for bachelor level (licences) divided into the following main areas:

- (a) common generic competence;
- (b) pre-professional competences;
- (c) transferable competences;
- (d) specific competences related to broad, disciplinary subject areas.

There are also many inter-university teams working on learning outcomes with the triple purpose of helping the implementation of the VAE, the registration of degrees in the RNCP, and employability of students. A systematic effort is now being made to support the introduction and use of a learning outcomes-based perspective, in particular for higher education. A nationwide process was initiated

in 2009-10 and regional meetings have been/are being held explaining the rationale behind this approach.

Initial vocational qualifications are defined according to the same logic as for higher education qualifications, in terms of skills, knowledge and competences. There are different forms of VET provision, though, influencing the way learning outcomes are assessed, following four main approaches:

- (a) qualifications based on training modules, the learning outcomes of each module being assessed separately;
- (b) qualification based on a two-block approach, theory and practical experience, the learning outcomes of the two blocks being assessed separately;
- (c) qualification linked to a single, coherent block of learning outcomes/competences requiring a holistic approach to assessment of learning outcomes;
- (d) qualification based on units of learning outcomes, which can be assessed separately, and capitalised independently of any kind of learning process.

All four operate using a learning outcomes/competence-based approach, though in different ways.

The emphasis given to transparency is demonstrated by the way the French NQF uses the Europass certificate supplement. This format is seen as important for transparency and as relevant at all levels, including higher education. The supplement has been strengthened as regards competence/learning outcomes. The main focus is on the three descriptor elements – knowledge, skills and competences – but the link to quality assurance and to validation of non-formal and informal learning is also addressed by the framework.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽³⁾

Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is directly linked to formal qualifications, as VAE specifically aims at the award of an official formal qualification (certification). VAE procedure can be organised for all qualifications registered in the RNCP, except when a qualification is linked to a 'regulated profession' (where activity made without the corresponding qualification is illegal).

No changes have been made to the legislative framework for validation in recent years but, according to the European inventory, reform is currently under

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.
https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87058_FR.pdf

discussion at inter-ministerial level with a view to simplifying the current provisions in the Labour and Education Codes concerning VAE. This reform will bring clarification but is not expected to change significantly the purpose or the content of the procedure or governance systems. Other key policy objectives at the inter-ministerial level are encouraging use of VAE among the less qualified and improving monitoring and data collection systems based on common indicators used at regional level.

Referencing to the EQF

Work on referencing to the EQF has been under way since 2006 and the referencing report was presented to the EQF Advisory Group (EQF advisory group) in October 2010. From the start, referencing involved all ministries, social partners and other stakeholders (represented in the CNCP). The referencing work was also supported by the EQF test and pilot projects, notably the Leonardo da Vinci Net-testing project. The result of the referencing can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 **Levels correspondence established between the French qualifications framework and the EQF**

French 5-level structure	EQF
I – Doctoral grade	8
I – Master grade	7
II – Bachelor grade	6
III	5
IV	4
V	3
Not applicable	2
Not applicable	1

Source: French national commission of professional certification, 2012.

The referencing table shows the limitations of the five-level structure in terms of specificity and ability to reflect the diversity of qualifications covered by the French framework. This is exemplified by level 1 (highest) which covers both master and doctorate, and by level 5 (lowest) which covers all initial qualifications.

The (lack) of low level vocational/professional qualifications has posed a particular challenge. Looking at the qualifications covered by the current level 5, it could be argued (from learning outcomes) that this broad category of qualifications covers both levels 2 and 3 of the EQF. A political decision has been made, however, to refer all these qualifications to level 3 of the EQF. Several of the countries represented in the EQF AG expressed some concern over this decision. Members of the advisory group argued that the absence of lower level qualifications in the French framework (in a worst case scenario) could prevent migrants holding qualifications at EQF level 1 or 2 from entering the French labour market, given that equivalents officially do not exist in the French system. Debate on this issue is now also evident at national level in France.

Timing for presentation of an updated referencing report to the EQF AG is now uncertain and will depend on revision of the level-structure and possibly on clarification of how to deal with the lower levels of vocational/professional qualifications.

Important lessons and the way forward

The French NQF operates with less clear distinction between VET and higher education than many other European countries, signalling a wish to promote vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications at all levels. Since the 1970s, vocational courses and programmes have been an important and integrated part of traditional universities and professional bachelor and master degrees are common. Outside universities we find specialist technical and vocational schools offering courses and certificates at a high level. These schools are run by different ministries covering their respective subject areas (such as agriculture or health), or by chambers of commerce and industry. *Ingénieurs* from these institutions or students in business schools hold qualifications at a high level, equivalent to those from universities with a master degree. The Ministry of Higher Education delivers bachelor and master degrees and recognises the diplomas. This has an integrating effect on the diplomas awarded by other ministries such as culture or industry.

Practice is less clear-cut. As the French qualifications framework is currently defined by those qualifications registered in the RNCP, important general

education qualifications are left outside the framework. Compared to other European countries, addressing both professional and general qualifications, the integrating function and role of the French framework is lessened, in particular as a key qualification like the general baccalaureate is kept outside the framework.

The introduction of a new level structure to replace the 1969 structure could help to move the French NQF further forward and strengthen comparability to other European NQFs.

Main sources of information

Information is available on the website of the National Committee on Vocational Qualifications (CNCP) <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr> [accessed 6.10.2014].

Table 3 Qualifications types included in the French NQF/RNCP

French qualifications framework		
French Nomenclature	Qualifications types	EQF levels
I-Doctorat	Doctoral programmes (<i>Doctorats</i>)	8
I-Master	Master degrees (<i>Masters</i>)	7
	Degrees in engineering (<i>titre d'ingénieur</i>) (titles at level I)	
II-Grade de License	Bachelor programmes (<i>Licences</i>)	6
	Vocational bachelors (<i>Licence professionnelle</i>) (titles at level II)	
III	Undergraduate technician certificates (<i>Brevet de technicien supérieur</i>) (BTS)	5
	Undergraduate technician certificates in agriculture (<i>Brevet de technicien supérieur agricole</i>) (BTSA)	
	Undergraduate certificates in technology (<i>Diplôme universitaire de technologie</i>) (DUT)	
	Master's qualifications (<i>Brevets de maîtrise</i>) issued by the Chambers of Trade (<i>chambre des métiers</i>)	
IV	Vocational baccalaureates (<i>Baccalauréat professionnel</i>)	4
	Technological baccalaureates (<i>Baccalauréat technologique</i>)	
	Professional certificates (<i>Brevet professionnel</i>)	
	Applied arts certificates (<i>Brevet des métiers d'art</i>)	
	Technician certificates (<i>Brevet de technicien</i>)	
V	Secondary vocational certificates (<i>Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle</i>) (CAP), <i>Brevet d'études professionnelles</i> (BEP))	3
	Secondary vocational certificates in agriculture (<i>Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle agricole</i>) (CAPA) <i>Brevet d'études professionnelles agricoles</i> (BEPA))	
	No French qualifications and certificates at this level	1 2

Source: EQF, French national contact point.

List of abbreviations

CIEP	Centre international d'études pédagogiques
CNCP	Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle [National Committee on Vocational Qualifications]
CNIS	Conseil national de l'information statistique [National Council of Statistics]
CPC	Commission professionnelle consultative [consultative vocational committee]
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
RNCP	Registre national de la certification professionnelle [national register of vocational qualifications]
ROME	Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois [register of occupations in the French labour market]
VAE	validation des acquis de l'expérience [validation of non-formal and informal learning]

References

[URLs accessed 4.2.2015]

- CIEP (2014). *The use or potential use of QFs by HEIs and other stakeholders linked to mobility*. Sèvres: CIEP.
http://www.ciep.fr/sources/expert_educ/reconnaissance-des-diplomes/Final-Report-QFs-UHSE/index.html
- CNCP (2010). *Referencing of the national framework of French certification in the light of the European framework of certification for lifelong learning*.
<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/Report-FR-NQF-EQF-VF.pdf>
- CNIS (1969). *Nomenclature des niveaux de formation: approuvée par décision du groupe permanent de la formation professionnelle et de la promotion sociale* [training levels approved by decision of the standing group of vocational training and social promotion].
<http://www.rncp.cncp.gouv.fr/grand-public/explorerBaseDocumentaire?dossier=64>
- Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (2012). *Référentiels de compétences en licence* [detailed criteria for writing learning outcomes for bachelor level]. http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/Plan_licence/61/4/referentiel_227614.pdf