

# THE NETHERLANDS

## European inventory on NQF 2014

### Introduction

The Dutch Government gave its support to setting up a comprehensive qualifications framework for the Netherlands (NLQF) in September 2011. This was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in October 2011. The NLQF builds on and integrates the qualifications framework for higher education which was self-certified to the European higher education area in 2009.

The eight-level framework addresses two main categories of qualification: those regulated by the Ministries of Education, Economic Affairs and Health/Welfare; and those outside public regulation and developed by stakeholders (mainly) in the labour market. During 2012-14 significant progress was made with this latter group and more than 10 qualifications were approved for inclusion by mid-2014.

This emphasis on the double character of the national system – where private and public qualifications providers interact and supplement each other – is a defining feature of the NLQF. The NLQF national coordination point plays a key role in taking forward the framework, which is now fully operational. The Ministry of Education has submitted a legal proposal aimed at including national qualifications framework (NQF) and EQF levels in national qualifications and certification documents.

### Main policy objectives

The adoption of the framework has been rapid. Initial preparations started as late as January 2009 and moved into an early operational phase in 2012. Qualifications awarded by the private sector often have a strong ‘qualifying’ power in the labour market and their inclusion in the NLQF is expected to increase their visibility and further strengthen their value. The inclusion and classification of these qualifications will take place at the request of the bodies responsible for awarding diplomas and certificates; this is generally also the body which provides the learning programme leading to the qualification. By bringing ministry-regulated and other qualifications together in one framework, the NLQF will provide a substantially improved insight into the levels of qualifications offered and how these are related.

The NLQF addresses (van der Sanden, 2012) a wide group of potential beneficiaries and aims at:

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

Additional objectives are:

- (a) stimulate thinking in terms of learning outcomes as building blocks of qualifications;
- (b) promote lifelong learning;
- (c) increase the transparency of learning routes;
- (d) increase the understanding of the level of qualifications by players in the labour market;
- (e) aid communication between all stakeholders in education and employment.

In the Dutch EQF referencing report it is clearly stated that the NLQF has no role in reforming Dutch education and training, in regulating transfer and access, or in entitlements to qualifications and degrees. The framework is understood as a systematic arrangement of existing qualifications aiming at transparency and increased comparability. Whether the NQF will move from being a purely descriptive mechanism to an instrument supporting further development of Dutch education and training remains to be seen. Involving the private sector can be seen as moving beyond a purely descriptive role.

## Stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science coordinates development and implementation of the NLQF. Day-to-day running of the framework has been delegated to the NLQF national coordination point, in 2014 employing a staff of four persons.

Framework developments were initiated in spring 2009. A technical working group, coordinated by the three involved ministries, produced a first outline, subsequently reviewed by an official committee (the Leintsje-committee), providing the basis for all further work.

Different from many other countries, the initial development of the framework included few stakeholders outside the three ministries directly involved. The Leintsje-committee consisted of four professors recruited for their expertise in education and training matters and not for their ability to voice different interests and positions. While consultation has made it possible for all stakeholders to express their position on the developing framework, the original NLQF proposal was only weakly linked to stakeholders outside the main ministries involved in development.

The priority now given to the 'opening up' of the NLQF towards the private sector may have partly responded to this initial weakness. Systematic work has been carried out the last two years informing potential stakeholders about the potential inherent in the framework. This work is bearing fruit and the first 10 'private qualifications' have now been assessed and included into the NLQF (see Table 2).

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

## Framework implementation

The NLQF can now be described as fully operational. The active role played by the NLQF national coordination point has contributed to this, ensuring active follow-up on a day-to-day basis. While the coordination point operates with limited staff (three to four full-time posts), NLQF's visibility is gradually increasing, also among stakeholders outside formal education and training.

The criteria and procedures detailed in Box 1 illustrate the main principles now developed for the inclusion of 'other qualifications' into the NLQF.

### Box 1 **Opening up the NLQF: criteria and procedures**

The NLQF – represented by the national coordination point – has since 2012 actively promoted the potential to have a qualification included in, and levelled to, the framework. This is being presented as an opportunity for providers to achieve better overall visibility, to strengthen comparability with other qualifications at national and European level, to be able to apply the learning outcomes approach, and to strengthen links to the labour market.

If a provider such as a private company wants to submit a qualification for inclusion, it has to undergo accreditation (or in Dutch ‘validation’). Issues like legal status, property rights, the continuity of the organisation and the existence of quality assurance arrangements will be checked. A list of approved quality assurance systems is included in the guidance material now developed. If the provider does not use such systems, an on-site visit will be organised.

When an organisation has been accredited (for five years) it can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling. The organisation will indicate the level it sees as most appropriate and this will provide the starting point for the assessment on which a final decision will be made. When asking for inclusion, the organisation will have to indicate learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the NLQF level descriptors (see Table 1), the workload (no qualifications of fewer than 400 hours nominal workload will be considered), the assessment approaches to be applied, and the link to relevant occupational profile.

While the national coordination point will be responsible for organising the process, committees of independent, external experts will assess the applications and give their advice to the board of the national coordination point, which will eventually make the final decision on inclusion. The board includes all the major stakeholders involved in the NLQF, including ministries and social partners.

Organisations will have to pay to use the system. Accreditation will vary between EUR 1 000 and EUR 7 500, depending on whether an approved quality assurance system is in place. Submitting one qualification for inclusion is set at EUR 2 500.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education initiated revision of existing legal texts underpinning Dutch education and training to make sure that the role of the NLQF is reflected. This revision will also address the need to include NLQF and EQF levels in certificates and qualifications. It is not clear at the moment when this revision will be finalised. While this process will not prevent the NQF from carrying out its current work, it will ultimately strengthen the legal position of the framework.

## Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NLQF operates with one entry level (lower than EQF 1) and eight qualifications levels. All levels are defined on the basis of learning outcomes. The following key principles are emphasised:

- (a) levels do not refer to, and are not defined by, education sectors;

- (b) NLQF levels are not referenced to degrees or titles (meaning, for example, that a qualification at level 6 does not automatically belong to higher education and the achievement of this qualification does not give automatic entitlement to a bachelor degree);
- (c) all NLQF levels are open to all qualifications of all education sectors.

The learning outcomes approach used to describe the nine levels is based on the following elements.

Table 1 **Level descriptors in the NLQF**

<b>NLQF descriptors</b>				
<b>Context</b>				
The context descriptions of the levels are used along with the described knowledge to determine the grade of difficulty of skills.				
<b>Knowledge</b>				
Knowledge is the totality of facts, principles, theories and ways of working related to an occupation or a knowledge domain.				
<b>Skills</b>				
Cognitive abilities (logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical abilities (psychomotor skills in applying methods, materials, tools and instruments) applied within a given context				
<b>Applying knowledge</b> Reproduce, analyse, integrate, evaluate, combine and apply knowledge in an occupation or a knowledge domain.	<b>Problem-solving skills</b> Recognise or identify and solve problems.	<b>Learning and development skills</b> Personal development, autonomously or under supervision.	<b>Information skills</b> Obtain, collect, process, combine, analyse and assess information.	<b>Communication skills</b> Communicate based on conventions relevant to the context.
<b>Responsibility and independence</b>				
The proven ability to collaborate with others and to take responsibility for own work or study results or of others.				

Source: van der Sanden, 2012.

Table 1 demonstrates the influence of the EQF descriptors, but differs in some important respects. As in several other countries, making context explicit has been seen as important. The subdomains introduced for skills can be seen as a way specifying the descriptors and making them more relevant to the Dutch context. They can also be seen as reflecting Dutch experiences in applying learning outcomes, for example in VET (upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) (MBO)) in recent years.

The learning-outcomes-, competence-oriented approach is broadly accepted and used in Dutch education and training. The Dutch referencing report to the EQF (2012) details a strong tradition of ‘objectives-led’ governance of education and training, an approach which has proved conducive for a competence-based approach. Vocational education and training (VET) is probably most advanced in competence orientation; following extensive reform, a new VET competence-based structure has been developed and implemented. The same tendencies can be observed in general and higher education, although less systematic. The introduction of the qualifications framework for higher education has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes, as has the involvement of single institutions in the so-called ‘tuning project’.

The strong position of the learning outcomes approach is reflected in the relatively widespread use of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The NLQF will strengthen the role of validation and turn it into an integrated part of the qualifications system. The use of validation as an integrated part of the framework will help to connect with a wider range of learning activities and learning settings, for example in the private sector.

## Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF <sup>(1)</sup>

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands commenced in 1998 under the umbrella term ‘validation of prior learning’ (*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*) (EVC). It comprises two main formal instruments:

- (a) the *Ervaringscertificaat* is the formal procedure in which a candidate obtains a certificate – the *Ervaringscertificaat* – verifying learning outcomes measured against a national qualification standard. This is a summative approach;
- (b) the *Ervaringsprofiel* sets up a personal portfolio. It is a formative approach aimed at validation of a candidate’s competences. It advises on the possible opportunities for certification or personal development steps. This form can be called recognition of prior learning (*Herkennen van Verworven Competenties*).

The *Ervaringsprofiel* and the *Ervaringscertificaat* are formal procedures that can only be awarded if they are carried out by accredited EVC suppliers.

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

Certificates assess and recognise competences in relation to national standards described in terms of learning outcomes. All qualifications in the registries of qualifications, such as the central register of vocational courses for VET (Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs) indicate if there are possibilities of acquiring qualifications through validation. The NLQF also offers providers the possibility of including qualifications not regulated by the government in the framework (as described above in Box 1).

The *Ervaringscertificaat* can be used by the candidate to request exemptions from the exam committee of a body awarding a qualification; final responsibility for granting exemptions lies with the awarding bodies. In theory, a full diploma can be granted on the basis of EVC if the applicant can prove his or her learning outcomes are in line with the expected learning outcomes of a diploma. In practice this is very difficult for schools and universities to implement.

There has been a change of strategy for validation since 2013 accompanying the government's drive towards 'a participation society' in which all stakeholders take responsibility for their own role in (lifelong) learning. In this sense, focus will be on expanding EVC formal procedures to provide certificates not only linked to national qualifications, but also to sector standards (sector level training or, in the context of the Netherlands, post-initial or non-formal learning). Another objective is to share ownership of the method and its instruments, such as the use of portfolio, assessment and validation.

## Referencing to the EQF

The Netherlands referenced its NQF to the EQF in October 2011.

The process drew attention to the proposal for referencing the academically oriented secondary education (pre-university secondary education (*vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs*) (VWO)) to level 5 of the EQF. Following the feedback from the EQF advisory group, it was accepted that this particular qualification should be referenced to level 4 of the EQF, but introduced a differentiation within the NQF, designating the VWO qualification as 4+ (in reality introducing a sublevel).

Table 2 **Levels correspondence established between the NLQF and the EQF**

NLQF	EQF
Level 8	Level 8
Level 7	Level 7
Level 6	Level 6
Level 5	Level 5
Level 4 and 4+	Level 4
Level 3	Level 3
Level 2	Level 2
Level 1	Level 1
Entry level	

Source: van der Sanden et al., 2012.

## Important lessons and future plans

The Dutch NQF is now in operation, opening up to 'other qualifications' in the private sector. Future success will largely depend on whether the framework will be seen as relevant to stakeholders outside the limited circle of formal, public education and training. Stakeholders close to the process see the need to develop a comprehensive communication strategy in the coming period to ensure that as many of them as possible are involved in development and implementation of the framework. The responsible ministry must ensure that the role of the NLQF is clearly defined in planned revision of the existing legal basis.

### Main sources of information

The national coordination point is hosted by the (umbrella) organisation CINOP/Knowledge Centre for Recognition of Prior Learning: <http://www.ncpnlqf.nl> [accessed 17.10.2014].

Table 3 Types of qualifications in the NLQF by mid-2014

NQF levels	Adult education	Pre-vocational education	Upper secondary vocational education	Upper secondary general education	Higher education	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
8					Doctorate/ medical specialist ( <i>Doctoraat/Medisch specialist</i> )		8
7					Master		7
6					Bachelor	Psychosocial counsellor ( <i>Psychosociaal counselor</i> )  Stress management counselling coaching mediation professional ( <i>Stressmanagement coaching counseling conflictbemiddeling professional</i> )  Business relationship manager ( <i>Relatiemanager Bedrijven</i> ) ABN Amro (enterprise counsellor, banking)	6
5					Higher professional education ( <i>Hoger beroepsonderwijs</i> ) (HBO)/ associate degree	Consultant payroll services and benefits	5
4+	VWO			VWO			4
4	General secondary education for adults ( <i>Voortgezet algemeen</i> )		MBO-4 VET	Havo		International flight attendant	4

	<i>volwassenenonderwijs</i> (Vavo) Higher general secondary education ( <i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i> ) (Havo)					Senior employee ( <i>senior medewerker</i> )	
3			MBO-3 VET			Investigating officer ( <i>Algemeen Opsporingsambtenaar</i> ) Dog grooming ( <i>Hondentolletteren</i> ) Swimming instructor ( <i>Zwemonderwijzer</i> )	3
2	Vavo Pre-vocational secondary education, theoretical pathway ( <i>Voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs, theoretische leerweg</i> ) (Vmbo tl) Basic education 3	Vmbo kb/bl/bb (**)	MBO-2 VET			Military police ( <i>Marechausseebeveiliging</i> )	2
1	Basic education 2	Vmbo bb	MBO-1 VET				1
Entry level	Basic education 1						Entry level

(\*) These are single qualifications included in the NLQF as of June 2014. These qualifications have been awarded by organisations outside the public, formal education and training system but, following quality control, attributed levels in the framework. The 'size' of these qualifications varies, but a minimum of 400 hours of nominal study time is required for a qualification to be considered for inclusion.

(\*\*) Kb-advanced VET pathway, bl- pre-vocational learning pathway, bb-basic VET pathway.

Source: Adapted from van der Sander et al., 2012, additional information provided by the national coordination point.

## List of abbreviations

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

## References

[URLs accessed 17.10.2014]

- European Commission et al. (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014. Country report: the Netherlands*.
- van der Sanden, K.; Smit, W.; Dashorst, M. (2012). *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualification framework to the European qualifications framework*. [https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF\\_Referencing\\_Netherlands\\_022012.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf)