

# POLAND

## European inventory on NQF 2014

### Introduction

The Polish qualifications framework (PQF) currently being put in place is part of broad reform of the qualifications system <sup>(1)</sup>. Coordinated by the intra-ministerial taskforce for lifelong learning <sup>(2)</sup>, the reform aims at promoting lifelong learning and putting in place education, training and learning solutions better able to respond to the needs of the labour market and society in general. The PQF and the new national register of qualifications are the two key building blocks in this reform.

The new framework comprises eight learning outcomes-based levels applicable to all types of qualifications, covering general education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. The framework – and the register – will be open to the private and non-formal sectors as long as the qualifications in question meet agreed quality criteria. The new PQF builds on, takes into account, and integrates the work on a qualifications framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process.

The PQF was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in May 2013 (Educational Research Institute, 2013), in a joint report also covering self-certification to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) (Educational Research Institute, 2014). A legal process to introduce a separate law covering the national qualifications framework (NQF) and the qualification register was started in autumn 2014. The proposal for the new law will be presented to the Polish parliament in spring 2015 and is expected to come into force in January 2016. The PQF will, if things go to plan, be fully operational on this date.

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<sup>(1)</sup> By national qualifications system is understood the entirety of state activities related to the validation of learning outcomes to satisfy the needs of the labour market, civil society and personal development of learners.

<sup>(2)</sup> Appointed by the prime minister and including Ministries of Education, Labour and Social Policy, Science and Research and Economy.

## Main policy objectives

Work on the qualifications framework is part of broad reform and modernisation of the Polish qualifications system, addressing all levels and all subsystems. An important part of this reform, initiated in 2010, is an overall shift to learning outcomes. This requires redesign of all programmes, standards and curricula, in general, vocational and higher education and training. The framework is seen as an important instrument for strengthening the transparency and overall consistency of education and training, which is considered by some to be fragmented and difficult to navigate. It is also underlined that while participation in initial education is very high in Poland, participation in lifelong learning is low compared to other European countries: less than 5% of 25 to 64 year-olds report having taken part in lifelong learning, compared to the European Union average of 9%.

The direction chosen for the PQF is interesting in a wider European setting. First, the framework is seen as a tool for reform and change; its role goes beyond merely describing existing qualifications. Second, the qualifications framework is seen as one of several elements in a wider strategy. It is acknowledged that qualifications frameworks cannot operate in isolation; their impact depends on how they are integrated into wider policy. Third, while the framework introduces a coherent set of national levels and descriptors, it also identifies the need for additional learning outcomes descriptors to be used by subsystems and sectors and which will allow for a more detailed fit-for-purpose approach (see Level descriptors and learning outcomes, below).

The new qualifications register is presented as a separate initiative closely linked to the PQF. It is intended to provide a list of all qualifications which can be obtained in Poland. At this stage four different categories of qualification have been identified:

- (a) those awarded under laws regulating general education;
- (b) those awarded under laws and regulations on higher education;
- (c) other qualifications established by national bodies;
- (d) qualifications established by foreign entities that are awarded in Poland.

The link to the PQF will be assured by attributing all registered qualifications a level in the national framework and the EQF. Qualifications so far not registered in Poland can be included based on assessment by experts. The procedures and criteria for this have yet to be developed, but may follow routes taken in, for example, the Netherlands and Sweden.

## Stakeholder involvement

In 2010 the prime Minister appointed two bodies to take responsibility for overall reform of the Polish qualification system, including development and implementation of the PQF and the national register of qualifications:

- (a) an intra-ministerial taskforce for lifelong learning strategy, including the PQF, comprising all institutional stakeholders: Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Research and Higher Education, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Health. This team is led by the Ministry of National Education;
- (b) a subgroup of the taskforce, the PQF steering committee, comprising all key institutional stakeholders (Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Research and Higher Education, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Health. In May 2011 the Ministries of Health, Culture and Defence joined the committee). This committee is run by the Ministry of Research and Higher Education and is supported by the Polish NCP as well as the Educational Research Institute. All projects supporting the development and implementation of the PQF are monitored and coordinated by the steering committee.

The authorities decided in 2009 that establishing the PQF will require additional administrative and research support. Two external institutions were involved in the first stage of preparation: the Education Research Institute and the Cooperation Fund Foundation. In the second stage, the Education Research Institute has the main responsibility for coordinating the designing of the PQF, including relevant research, conceptual work and consultation. Also, the Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange has been appointed as national coordination point for the EQF.

Unlike many other countries, the above bodies do not directly include representatives of social partners or civil society. Such representatives can contribute to the work in an advisory capacity, but it is not clear what this means for the involvement and ownership of stakeholders outside public administration. Seen from the outside and compared to other countries, Polish developments can be described as a combination of top-down and research driven. Whether this could have a negative impact on the implementation of the framework is difficult to judge; how to ensure broad commitment and ownership outside the public sector is an issue to be addressed in the next couple of years. However, two broad consultations have been carried out since 2011 and a high number of meetings (200+) has been organised across the country addressing a wide range of stakeholders.

It is envisaged that it will be necessary to appoint/establish an institution responsible for running the PQF and other instruments emerging from the qualifications reform. Such an institution would, for example, be responsible for maintaining the qualifications register, accrediting awarding bodies and monitoring the use of validation. A decision on this issue has yet to be made.

## Framework implementation

The technical development of the PQF has been very thorough and provides a strong basis for future developments. To release this potential, and turn the PQF into an operational framework, requires a clear legal basis. The proposal for a new Law on the PQF and the qualification register is expected to be presented to the Polish parliament in spring 2015. If adopted as planned, this would allow the PQF to become operational from January 2016.

## Levels descriptors and learning outcomes

The PQF introduces descriptors for different purposes:

- (a) Polish universal descriptors forming the basis for the comprehensive PQF;
- (b) Polish descriptors for education and training subframeworks, for example for general, vocational and higher education;
- (c) Polish descriptors for sector frameworks or for subject areas.

The PQF thus includes three main sets of level descriptors, operating to different degrees of generality. The universal PQF is the most generic (first degree). The second set of descriptors addresses the main subsystems of education and training (higher education, vocational education, general education). The last of these can be further developed through a third set of descriptors (not indicated above), for example oriented towards specific fields of higher education (subject areas) or for VET in different economic sectors. The basic principles behind this are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Three sets of level descriptors in PQF

EQF Generic descriptors (meta degree)		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Universal PQF Generic descriptors (I degree of genericness)									
		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
	Appropriate for general education								
PQF Generic descriptors (II degree of genericness)									
	Appropriate for vocational education								
	Appropriate for higher education								

Source: Educational Research Institute, 2013.

While the coexistence of several qualifications subframeworks is common in most European countries, the PQF takes one step further and tries to express how these can be made explicit within an overarching conceptual (learning outcomes) approach. This means that when, for example, the financial sector wants to establish a specialised sectoral qualifications framework, it should use learning outcomes descriptors clearly connected to the level descriptors operating at other levels of generality (including EQF). While moving beyond the general, national level descriptors, the PQF is better able to link to current reform of standards and curriculum development and eventually to learning and assessment.

To what extent this approach will be able to promote communication between different levels and subsystems can only be tested by an operational framework. The challenge is to avoid a fragmented approach where sectors operate in isolation and – in the worst case – increase rather than reduce obstacles between institutions and sectors.

Originally the PQF was envisaged as a seven-level framework, closely resembling existing qualifications and degrees in the Polish system; it was later decided to introduce a new level 5. While still empty, this will allow for more appropriate placing of ‘short cycle’ academic qualifications as well as advanced vocational qualifications, possibly including the master craftsman (*Meister*).

The learning outcomes descriptors developed for the ‘universal PQF’ refer to the following key learning domains (Table 1).

Table 1 **Level descriptor in the PQF**

<b>Knowledge</b>	Scope
	Depth of understanding
<b>Skills</b>	Problem-solving and applying knowledge in practice
	Learning
	Communication
<b>Social competence</b>	Identity
	Cooperation
	Responsibility

Source: Adapted from Educational Research Institute, 2013.

These descriptors are based on agreement between stakeholders in general, vocational and higher education and are the common reference point for developments at sector (second generic degree) and subsector (third generic degree) levels.

Progress has been made in defining level descriptors for different education and training sectors. The basic distinction between knowledge, skills and social competences will be used at the subsector PQF at second generic degree, but will differ in terms of specificity. This is exemplified by the proposal for VET <sup>(3)</sup> where each of the three main domains has to be specified according to:

- (a) information;
- (b) ideas;
- (c) cooperation;
- (d) tools and materials.

For general education, the same three dimensions, based on initial expert proposals, were grouped under the following titles:

- (a) native and foreign languages;
- (b) maths/sciences;
- (c) natural/environmental sciences;
- (d) social functions;
- (e) identity.

Level descriptors for the third generic degree have yet to be developed. It is possible, however, to see the work of the 'tuning-project' as relevant to defining learning outcomes in particular subject-areas of higher education.

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<sup>(3)</sup> No official translation is available and the final version may contain slightly different terms.

Progress can be observed in the overall shift to learning outcomes in Polish education and training. Core curricula formulated in terms of learning outcomes have recently been introduced for all key areas of education and training. The core curriculum for general education has been gradually introduced since the 2009/10 school year and will be fully in place as of the 2014/15 school year. These learning outcomes also form the basis for assessment. The core curriculum for vocational education will be implemented from the 2012/13 school year, being finalised by 2015/16. The core curriculum also forms the basis for assessment criteria. As of the 2012/13 academic year, the NQF for higher education will apply, generally defining learning outcomes in eight areas of learning. Curricula for specific fields addressed by higher education institutions at the first and second cycles will have to be described in terms of learning outcomes, as well as show how they can be assessed. For third cycle studies (doctoral), regulations from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education describe expected learning outcomes.

## Validation of non-formal and informal learning <sup>(4)</sup>

Work on reforming the national qualifications system includes a number of links to related policy areas: putting in place arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning is given high priority. The proposal for a new law covering the NQF and the qualification register was started in autumn 2014 and will also address validation of non-formal and informal learning and indicate how this is linked to the overall reform of education and training.

The current legal framework for education does not define the term 'validation', but there are central-level regulations that address validation of learning outcomes achieved outside of formal education. The legal environment has been gradually adjusting to meet demands in this respect and different aspects of non-formal education are regulated by separate legislation. Adults who are not school students are allowed to take external examinations, organised by regional examination boards, so confirming both general qualifications (for example *matura* exam) and vocational qualifications in school professions. The latter can be confirmed also by vocational examination after completing a non-formal qualifying training course.

There are no general rules in higher education for validating learning outcomes achieved outside university. Formulation of such procedures is mainly up to each university, but general rules concerning learning outcomes set by law

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<sup>(4)</sup> This section is based on European Commission et al., 2014.

must be observed. However, according to the proposal to amend the Higher Education Act, the common rules of recognition of prior learning will be introduced in the sector.

There are also other procedures to confirm learning outcomes acquired outside formal education. These include validation provided by professional associations in certain occupations (including security worker, engineers and technical staff in the electrical power sector, work safety and hygiene technicians and officers) or initiatives carried out by third sector organisations, such as certified non-governmental organisation trainers. However, these are not regulated in a systematic way. There are numerous different validation procedures: some have a relatively long tradition, others should be considered more as pilot projects designed not for the confirmation of competences on a large scale, but rather to develop and test new methods of validation in a specific regional, social or occupational context.

The concept of the integrated qualifications register provides the possibility of expanding the set of registered qualifications to those awarded by other organisations outside the formal system.

## Referencing to the EQF

The PQF was referenced to the EQF in 2013. A joint self-certification to the QF-EHEA took place at the same time.

## Important lessons and the way forward

PQF developments are interesting in a broader international context as they represent an effort to combine the introduction of a comprehensive national framework with parallel development of sector and subsector frameworks. While the coexistence of frameworks at different levels and for different purposes can be found in many countries, the Polish approach tries to introduce conceptual coherence, allowing for synergies between frameworks at different levels and in different sectors. Practical implementation of the PQF should be followed closely as it may provide a model for other countries struggling to find ways to bridge and connect sectors and subsectors of education and training. Whether this complex model will work in practice, and how it can promote consistent use of learning outcomes across levels and subsystems and sectors, will have to be carefully monitored. Progress made in introducing the learning outcomes approach in the different subsectors of education and training provides a good basis for future developments.

While providing a very interesting technical model, translation of the current PQF proposal into a credible and politically agreed framework will require that the proposal for a NQF law is successfully carried through the Polish parliament during 2015. Any delays will put in jeopardy the extensive technical work already carried out. The future involvement of stakeholders outside education and training and research will be particularly important.

#### Main sources of information

Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange acts as the national coordination point: <http://www.buwiwm.edu.pl/eng/index.htm> [accessed 3.11.2014].

Table 2 The Polish qualifications framework

NQF levels	Qualifications included in the PQF (indicatory)	EQF levels
8	Diploma certifying the academic degree of <i>Doktor</i> in specific discipline	8
7	Diploma certifying the title of <i>Magistyer</i>	7
	Diploma certifying the title of Magister <i>Inzynier</i>	
	Diploma certifying a title equivalent to Magister or <i>Inzynier</i>	
6	First cycle vocational title	6
	Diploma certifying the title of <i>Licencjat</i>	
	Diploma certifying the title of <i>Inzynier</i>	
	Diploma certifying a title equivalent to <i>Licencyat</i> or <i>Inzynier</i>	
5		5
4	Matura certificate	4
	Vocational certificate	
	Vocational diploma	
3	Vocational certificate	3
	Vocational diploma	
2	Certificate of completing lower secondary school	2
1	Certificate of completing primary school	1

(\*) All these levels will only become official following the adoption of a NQF law (planned for 2015). Levels have yet to be indicated for several qualification types. This applies to certificate for completing basic VET in basic VET schools, certificate for completing technical upper secondary school, certificate for completing general upper secondary school, certificate for completing post-secondary non-tertiary school and college diploma (for example from teacher training colleges).

Source: Polish referencing report.

## List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
PQF	Polish qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework for the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training

## References

[URLs accessed 3.11.2014]

Educational Research Institute (2013). *Referencing the polish qualifications framework for lifelong learning to the European qualifications framework*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.

<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/Polish%20Referencing%20Report.pdf>

Educational Research Institute (2014). *Self-certification report of the national qualifications framework for higher education*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.

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