

PORTUGAL

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

A comprehensive Portuguese qualifications framework (*Quadro Nacional de Qualificações*) (QNQ) has been in place since October 2010 as a single reference for classifying all qualifications awarded by the Portuguese education and training system. Established by Decree Law No 396/2007 (*Decreto-Lei* No 396/2007) ⁽¹⁾, the framework (including eight levels and level descriptors of learning outcomes) was published in July 2009 (Portaria No 782/2009) ⁽²⁾. Higher education qualifications were included in the more detailed framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ-Portugal), which is part of the comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF). It was linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in 2011 and has been gradually implemented.

Main policy objectives

The NQF is seen as a tool for reforming Portuguese education and training. Initiated through the 2007 reform ⁽³⁾, development of the national qualifications system and NQF forms part of a broader education and training programme, notably the ‘new opportunities’ initiative and the ‘agenda for reform of vocational training’. These reforms aim to raise low qualification levels of the Portuguese population (youngsters and adults) ⁽⁴⁾.

Three main goals are emphasised to:

⁽¹⁾ http://www.dges.mctes.pt/NR/ronlyres/90DBE647-5CB6-4846-B88F-101180D9E425/5042/DL396_2007.pdf [accessed 22.9.2014].

⁽²⁾ <http://www.catalogo.anqep.gov.pt/boDocumentos/getDocumentos/163> [accessed 22.9.2014].

⁽³⁾ Decree Law No 396/2007.

⁽⁴⁾ There have been programmes and investments in qualifications over the past two decades; progress has been made; however, numbers of early school-leavers (aged 18 to 24) – although having decreased sharply in past years – are still high (20.8% in 2012) and the working population (aged 24 to 64) having at least upper secondary education was 40.9% in 2013 (Eurostat data).

- (a) reinforce vocational/technical pathways as real options for young people (ANQ, 2011) (European Commission et al., 2010) ⁽⁵⁾;
- (b) upgrade education and qualification levels of the adult population;
- (c) promote attainment of secondary education as a minimum level of qualification in Portugal ⁽⁶⁾.

For young people, the reform focuses on measures to prevent early school-leaving and sets out to establish secondary level qualifications as a minimum requirement to be reached by everyone ⁽⁷⁾. For adults, the reform offers those with low qualifications a new opportunity, through formal education and training and validation, to complement and expand their level of knowledge, skills and competences. The validation arrangements are particularly important, offering opportunities in both general and professional fields.

From the public policy perspective, development of an integrated national qualifications system and framework was regarded as necessary and a further contribution to such an ambitious programme as 'new opportunities'. The comprehensive approach to the EQF was seen as an inspiration for initiating reforms and developing a national qualifications system and a comprehensive NQF. This aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications obtained in different education and training subsystems (general education, vocational education and training (VET), etc.) within the scope of a single framework, allowing people to combine and transfer qualifications.

The reforms also aim to develop, integrate and further develop the system for valuing and recognising competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, in progress since 2001. However, there have been policy changes in the past year due to austerity measures (see validating non-formal and informal learning).

There is also new impetus to promoting attractiveness of vocational training. All VET should serve to strengthen both education levels and professional certification of the workforce.

⁽⁵⁾ The National Agency for Qualifications (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação, I.P.) (ANQ), set the objective that 50% of those enrolled in upper secondary level should achieve a vocational qualification.

⁽⁶⁾ Portugal has also raised the compulsory schooling age to 18.

⁽⁷⁾ The ANQ has set an objective that 50% of the cohort at upper secondary level achieves a vocational qualification.

In parallel, a framework for higher education was established and used as a tool to support reforms and developments ⁽⁸⁾. The main aims were to set up clear learning standards and identify progression routes through levels of learning (MCTES, 2009).

Apart from the NQF's national reform role, improving comparability and transparency of Portuguese qualifications and their understanding abroad by linking them to the EQF was also emphasised.

Stakeholder involvement

Initial work on the NQF was carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, with support from the Ministry of Education. In 2007, Decree Law No 396/2007 was adopted as the legal basis for developing the Portuguese qualifications system and framework. An agreement was signed between the government and the social partners on key elements: tools and regulatory systems to support development and implementation of the national qualifications systems and framework.

Framework implementation

Three main steps were taken to put the national qualifications system and framework into practice.

First, a new institutional model was developed to support setting up the national qualifications system and framework. The ANQ, now the National Agency for Qualifications and VET (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional, I.P.) (ANQEP), under the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, was established in 2007 to coordinate implementation of education and training policies for young people and to develop the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences. The National Council for Vocational Training was set up as a tripartite body. In higher education, the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) was set up in 2007.

Second, a national qualifications catalogue was created in 2007 as a strategic management tool for non-higher national qualifications and a central reference tool for VET provision. For each qualification it defines an occupational

⁽⁸⁾ The current rate of tertiary attainment at 27.2% (2012) is still below the European Union average (35.7), but Portugal has made significant progress in recent years.

profile, a training standard (that awards a double certification) and a recognition, validation and certification of competences standard; the catalogue is permanently updated by ANQEP, in a process supported by 16 sector qualifications councils.

Third, the system for recognising non-formal and informal learning (RVCC) was further integrated into the NQF. The RVCC refers to the qualification standards in the national qualifications catalogue, both to 'school-based competences' (four, six, nine or 12 years of school) and 'professional competences'. The key competences standards for adult education and training for basic and secondary level are structured into key competence areas, covering different contents of subjects at these specific educational levels.

ANQEP is the main public body in charge of implementing the NQF. The agency's main responsibilities are education and double-certified vocational training offer for adults and for young people, the national qualifications catalogue (with help from sector qualifications councils) and the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences. The agency also acts as national coordination point and played a key role in referencing national qualifications to the EQF. Another important role is to articulate and communicate with the General Directorate for Higher Education regarding levels 5 to 8 of the NQF.

The NQF is in an early operational stage. All VET is already organised around the NQF: databases are organised considering the NQF structure and access to financial support also takes the framework into consideration. Further, all national VET qualifications indicate the corresponding NQF qualification level, thus becoming increasingly visible to individuals. Education and training stakeholders are involved in implementation of the NQF. There is still a need to discuss and raise awareness of key new concepts and learning outcomes among different stakeholders and disseminate information to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, especially in the labour market, where the NQF is not very well-known.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

An eight-level reference structure was adopted to cover all the qualifications awarded in the Portuguese system. National qualifications levels and level descriptors are the same as in the EQF in terms of categories and principles.

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge and skills; in the third column, the term attitude is used. The term competence was already defined and used as an overarching concept within the national qualifications system as

‘recognised capacity to mobilise knowledge, skills and attitudes in contexts of work, professional development, education and personal development’⁽⁹⁾.

The learning outcome approach plays an important role in reforming Portuguese education and training. The NQF has been a driving force behind incorporation of the learning outcomes approach into the Portuguese education and training system (Cedefop, forthcoming). There is a diversity of approaches and concepts and the level of implementation varies across education subsystems. Fine-tuning learning outcomes in qualifications design with the NQF level descriptors is a challenging task and is work in progress (such as upgrading not only the national qualifications catalogue, but also qualifications in general education).

In general education, the national curriculum for basic education – essential competences was a national reference document for planning learning activities at both school and class levels until 2011. After a revision of the curriculum structure of basic and secondary education (considered too general and abstract) and to improve quality of education in Portugal, new programmes and curriculum outcome targets (*Metas curriculares*) were defined for several subjects of basic and secondary education. This was followed by public consultation. These curriculum outcome targets are focused on knowledge and essential skills students need to master in different school years and cycles. They provide a fundamental and clear reference for teaching, presenting in detail the purpose of these subjects, the content to be acquired and skills and general capabilities to be developed. Entry into force of the curriculum outcome targets and programmes began in 2013/14 and will be run gradually, according to predefined and approved timetables.

In VET, reforms concentrate on the learning outcomes dimension of developing qualifications standards and curriculum development. The qualifications obtained in VET subsystems are organised by standards included in the national qualifications catalogue. Each qualification is organised in terms of units. Adjusting qualifications to the level descriptors is work in progress (about 25% of qualifications have been updated and learning outcomes adjusted to the level descriptors). A new methodology for designing and describing qualifications based on learning outcomes has been prepared and will be published by end 2014.

In higher education, higher education institutions are responsible for implementing the framework and implementing learning outcomes within the

⁽⁹⁾ Defined by Order No 782/2009 (Portaria No 782/2009) on national qualification system.

study programmes. Implementation across institutions differs from one institution to another.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF ⁽¹⁰⁾

Several public policies and initiatives have been developed for validating non-formal and informal learning in Portugal. Since 2001, a comprehensive national system – national system for the RVCC – was implemented. During 2012-13, major changes were introduced into the system. A total of 450 new opportunities centres in charge of validation and recognition of competences (for people over 18) were replaced by a new network of 214 centres for qualification and vocational training in early 2014. The new network assumes similar functions, but also targets young people (age 15) and provides guidance, counselling and validation activities to low-skilled adults and guides/orients young people completing nine years of basic education.

The RVCC system is incorporated in the national qualifications system and framework. It integrates two main processes:

- (a) education RVCC process, aiming to improve education levels of adults, who have no basic or secondary education certificates;
- (b) professional RVCC process, for adults who do not have vocational qualifications in their occupational areas.

Adults can acquire basic or secondary level education certificates and vocational qualification from levels 1 to 4 in the NQF. Such certificates have the same value as those awarded in formal education and training. RVCC processes are based on national standards for education and training (such as key competences in adult education and training reference framework) and integrated into the national catalogue of qualifications, used as a reference for vocational qualifications.

At higher education level validation is generally linked to the credit system and module-based structure of courses and degrees. Students can obtain ECTS credits through validation that can be used for granting exemptions from part of a course in the first, second or third cycles of Bologna degrees. These credits are portable across higher education institutions in Portugal. The new legislation sets a limit of validation processes up to one third of the total number of European credit transfers and accumulation system relevant for a particular course.

⁽¹⁰⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

Referencing to the EQF

Portugal referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to the qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area in June 2011.

Table 1 **Level correspondence established between the Portuguese qualifications framework (QNQ) and the EQF**

QNQ	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: ANQ, 2011.

Important lessons and future plans

The decision was taken to adopt EQF levels and level descriptors in the NQF and to set up a comprehensive NQF. This makes it possible to:

- (a) integrate levels of education and a four-level structure for vocational training;
- (b) define double certification at levels 1, 2, 4 and 5.

Important work has been done by briefly writing the NQF users' guide on the referencing report (ANQ, 2011) and by publishing an e-book *NQF: interpretation guide* ⁽¹⁾.

This document aims to: support design of qualifications based on learning outcomes, guide inclusion of new qualifications in the NQF; contribute to more effective appropriation of the NQF by its users; and encourage participation of

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.anqep.gov.pt/default.aspx> [accessed 22.9.2014].

VET actors for systematic and proactive use of descriptors of the NQF in their planning and design of provision.

Further work on qualifications standards, based on explicit learning outcomes, will support coherence and fine-tune the relationship between qualifications and qualifications levels. This work is still in progress, but gained momentum with creation of a new methodology for designing and describing qualifications based on learning outcomes. This methodology will be published by end 2014 and will be disseminated to different stakeholders.

There is a need to disseminate outcomes of the referencing and self-certification process to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, especially improving acceptance and use of the NQF by the labour market. In this context, the relationship between the tertiary framework and other parts of the NQF (levels 1 to 5) needs to be made explicit, especially for level 5 programmes where different ministries are involved.

A strategy is being prepared, in articulation with the General Directorate for Higher Education, for including an explicit reference to the EQF level in national certificates, diplomas and Europass documents.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 22.9.2014]

The ANQEP is the national coordination point for the EQF in Portugal.
Information is available on the ANQEP website, especially on European tools:
<http://www.en.anqep.gov.pt>

Table 2 **The national qualifications framework in Portugal**

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree	8
7	Master degree	7
6	Bachelor degree	6
5	Diploma in technological specialisation	5
4	Secondary education and professional certification	4
	Secondary education and professional internship – minimum six months	
3	Secondary education	3
2	Third cycle of basic education	2
	Third cycle of basic education and professional certification	
1	Second cycle of basic education	1

Source: ANQ, 2011.

List of abbreviations

ANQ	Agência Nacional para a Qualificação [National Agency for Qualifications]
ANQEP	Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional [National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training]
ECTS	European credit transfer system
EQF	European qualifications framework
FHEQ	framework of higher education qualifications
MCTES	Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Ensino Superior [Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
QNQ	Quadro Nacional de Qualificações [Portuguese qualifications framework]
RVCC	system for recognising non-formal and informal learning
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 22.9.2014]

ANQ (2011). *Report on referencing the national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework.*

<file:///C:/Users/EBAR/Downloads/PT+EQF+Referencing+Report.pdf>

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