

SLOVAKIA

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

Work on the Slovak qualifications framework has been under way for some time, based on a 2009 government decision on European qualifications framework (EQF) implementation in Slovakia ⁽¹⁾. This was confirmed by the Act on Lifelong Learning of 2009 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2009a), amended in 2012 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2012) stipulating the legal background for development of a national qualifications system and framework. Development was complemented by legislation; the School Act of 2008 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2008), and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Act of 2009 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2009b). In 2011, level descriptors for a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning were approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports; encompassing qualifications from all subsystems of formal education and training (VET, general education and higher education).

However, in 2013, strategies for revision of the initial NQF were proposed, as well as suggestions for creation of a national qualifications system. The State Institute of VET (Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania) (ŠIOV) launched a national project under auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, aiming to develop a national system of qualifications. The system is intended to provide a comprehensive view of all full and partial qualifications with qualifications and assessment standards and pave the way for recognition of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL). It is also intended to ease communication between education and the labour market, as well as support creation of content and improve quality.

A revised NQF is foreseen as one outcome of the project, meaning each qualification of the national system will be classified at one of the levels of the NQF. The NQF is seen as a tool for transparency, comparing qualifications and supporting transfer and recognition of qualifications. The revised NQF is intended

⁽¹⁾ The decision is only available in Slovak:
http://www.rokovanie.sk/File.aspx/ViewDocumentHtml/Uznesenie-5819?prefixFile=u_ [accessed 5.10.2014].

to include all qualifications – general education, VET, higher education, qualifications gained through validation and qualifications outside the formal education system. The framework will be learning outcomes-based, with revised descriptors covering knowledge, skills and competence.

Project work takes place in five working groups, with stakeholders such as sectorial ministries, social partners and practitioners. Around 20 sector councils are involved, contributing to identification of sectorial skills and development of occupational standards. The work itself is seen as long term in nature, due to updating and complementing qualifications according to labour market needs; however, it is not yet clear whether there are plans for continuing work beyond 2013-15.

The project is cofinanced by European Union (EU) structural Funds. A project website has been set up as 'The project website for creating a national system of qualifications' (*Tvorba Národnej sústavy kvalifikácií*)⁽²⁾.

Main policy objectives

Apart from its transparency function and ease of referencing to the EQF, a comprehensive NQF has the following specific objectives:

- (a) improving links between education and labour market needs;
- (b) improving transparency and consistency of qualifications;
- (c) supporting validation of NFIL and improve lifelong learning.

Measures are planned to improve the match between labour market needs and skills supply (European Commission, 2013, pp. 133-137). The NQF, with its clear learning outcomes orientation, aims to support these actions.

The NQF's main pillars are the national register of qualifications and national register of occupations. The NQF aims to create a system environment to support comparability of learning outcomes achieved by various forms of learning and enable recognition of real knowledge and competences independently of the way they were acquired. A unified methodology for defining learning outcomes will be prepared and used for developing and renewing State educational programmes and study programmes for continuous training.

In Slovakia, adult participation in lifelong learning is among the lowest in the EU, at 3.1% in 2012 compared to an EU average of 9.0% that year. Plans have been made to review adult learning and continuing VET; in 2012, an action plan was adopted that includes specific measures to ease progress in adult learning.

⁽²⁾ <http://www.tvorbansk.sk/> [accessed 15.9.2014].

Stakeholder involvement

Work on the initial NQF was started and coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports. A steering group was established, chaired by the Director General for Adult Education and Youth Division, with members from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Culture. Administrative and research support was provided by the Ministry of Education. State institutes (State Vocational Education Institute and the National Institute of Pedagogy) are responsible for formal education.

A ministerial working group was created to analyse existing qualifications and do preparatory work with employers and employees. Coordination between NQF and Bologna implementation had already been established through cooperation with a national team of Bologna experts and the higher education department at the Ministry of Education.

In the review process, NQF revision is closely linked to development of the national qualifications system. In this process, stakeholder involvement also from the world of work is vital, including employers' chambers, unions, confederations and other professional associations. The Ministry of Education will be responsible for quality assurance, also involving the social partners.

Framework implementation

Implementation of the framework is an ongoing and gradual process, naturally, since framework development has been taking place in stages. Work on implementation of the learning outcomes approach has been going on for some time.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

In the initial work, an eight-level structure was approved to cover the main characteristics of the national qualification system and also be compatible with the EQF in terms of principles, categories and level descriptors. Level descriptors were defined as knowledge, skills and competence. However, they are being revised with more focus on skills descriptors to be in line with other national documents and to allow for inclusion of non-formal qualifications.

The learning outcomes approach has been recognised as part of the reform agenda and is being integrated into all new developments. The 'shift to learning

outcomes' policy is well embedded in national discourse and partly also in legislation. The learning outcomes approach is described in action plans, for example, related to:

- (a) changes in accreditation processes at higher education institutions, with a shift of emphasis to output indicators rather than input;
- (b) improved employability through a better match between content of education and demands of the labour market;
- (c) setting educational standards (including content and performance components) for primary and secondary schools;
- (d) progress in identification of occupational standards.

General education (primary/secondary) programmes have been revised to strengthen performance standards.

In VET, the learning outcomes approach is being reinforced through the VET Act of 2009 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2009b) and curriculum reform. Two-level educational VET programmes were introduced allowing schools to develop their own school curricula in cooperation with regional partners. In 2013, a new European Social Fund (ESF) project 'Development of national qualifications system' was launched to elaborate occupational and qualification standards.

In higher education, progress has been modest. Higher Education Law 2002 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2002) requires higher education institutions to describe a graduate's profile when applying for accreditation, but explicit identification of learning outcomes was not advanced (Cedefop, forthcoming). Progress in implementation of learning outcomes is expected during 2014 within comprehensive accreditation.

Validating NFIL and links to the NQF ⁽³⁾

At present, there is no national system of validation in place. National strategy is in development and the current review process is focusing on validation, including discussion on links between NFIL and the NQF. The underlying principles including a framework for quality assurance for recognition of NFIL are set out in the Act on Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2009a), but while some aspects of the legislation have been implemented and already revised (in particular quality assurance of non-formal education), others have not yet been implemented.

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

Procedures for recognition of NFIL will be defined in the national project on development of the qualifications system, which will develop qualifications and assessment standards for a range of qualifications. As of now, vocational qualifications in Slovakia are not based on units and they do not use a credit system.

Schools that want to carry out NFIL must be accredited by a regional council for education (this does not apply to higher education institutes). It is up to accredited education and training institutions to choose the assessment method to be used, in line with content of the qualification and assessment standard. The Act on Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2009a), states there has to be a theoretical and a practical part which can be written, oral or practical assignments or a combination of the three.

The main responsibility for validation policies lies with the Ministry of Education. Policies and initiatives are designed in cooperation with stakeholders; social partners, regional authorities, education and training institutions and central public administration.

Referencing to the EQF

An integrated referencing report to link to the EQF and self-certify in line with the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) is planned for September 2015.

Important lessons and future plans

One vital precondition for developing an NQF is establishing a good partnership platform between all stakeholders, especially involving social partners. Challenges ahead include intensifying cooperation with stakeholders and consulting with sector councils.

Work has been hampered by political discussions on the purpose, role and added value of the NQF, so progress has been slow and deadlines have not been met. However, since 2013 the need to establish a national qualifications system and framework has materialised in two ESF projects and an established NQF is seen as an important instrument for reviewing qualifications and programmes. Future work will strive to draw on experience from previous and current projects.

At present, plans exist for the review process (in the national project mentioned above) and completion of the referencing report (by 2015). Also, the intention is to indicate EQF levels on certificates, diplomas and Europass supplements as well as in national qualifications databases soon after completing the referencing process.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 18.9.2014]

Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport: <http://www.minedu.sk/index.php>

ŠIOV: <http://www.siov.sk/>

Project website for the creation of the national system of qualifications (*Tvorba Národnej sústavy kvalifikácií*): <http://www.tvorbansk.sk/>

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
NFIL	non-formal and informal learning
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework in the European higher education area
ŠIOV	Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania [State Institute of VET]
VET	vocational education and training

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[URLs accessed 15.9.2014]

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http://www.tnuni.sk/fileadmin/dokumenty/univerzita/dolezite_dokumenty/Zakon_184_2009_o_odbornom_vzdelavani.pdf
- Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2012). *315/2012 Z.z. Zákon z 21 septembra 2012, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 568/2009 Z.z. o celoživotnom vzdelávaní a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov [Law of 21 September 2012 amending and supplementing Law No 568/2009 on lifelong learning and amendments to certain laws]*.
<http://www.nocka.sk/uploads/32/66/326699b345212127bf6c794389136960/zakon-315-2012.pdf>