

POLAND

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The Polish qualifications framework (PQF) forms an integrated part of the Polish qualification system. It was formally adopted by the Parliament on 22 December 2015 ⁽¹⁾ and came into force in January 2016. Consisting of a number of different elements (the most important being the qualifications framework, the qualifications register and arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning) the aim of the new system is to promote lifelong learning and support education, training and learning more directly, responding to the needs of the labour market and society at large.

The qualifications framework consists of eight learning outcome-based levels applicable to all Polish qualifications, covering general education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. The framework and the register are open to the private and non-formal sectors as long as the qualifications in question meet agreed quality criteria. The new PQF builds on 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). It can be considered to have reached (an early) operational stage.

Policy objectives

Work on the qualifications framework is an integral 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

⁽¹⁾ Ustawa z dnia 22 grudnia 2015r o Zintegrowanym Systemie Kwalifikacji [Act of 22 December 2015 on the integrated qualifications system]: <http://www.infor.pl/akt-prawny/DZU.2016.008.0000064,ustawa-o-zintegrowanym-systemie-kwalifikacji.html>

framework, through its focus on learning outcomes, 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. While participation in initial education is high, 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 has relevance 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 does not operate alone but is seen as one of several elements in a wider policy strategy. The impact of qualifications frameworks depends on their integration into a wider policy strategy. 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, allowing for a more detailed fit-for-purpose approach.

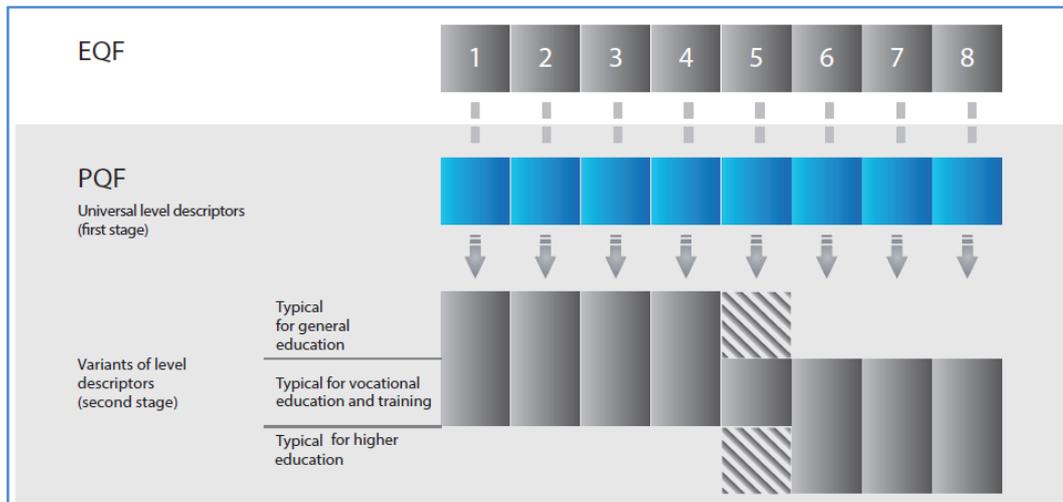
Levels and use of learning outcomes

The PQF introduces descriptors for different purposes:

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

The PQF thus includes three main sets of level descriptors, operating according to different degrees of generality. The universal PQF is the most generic (first stage). The second set 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 in Figure 1), 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. The structure of level descriptors in PQF



Source: Educational Research Institute, 2017.

While the coexistence of several qualifications sub-frameworks is common in most European countries, the PQF takes a 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 the 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 a worst case scenario – 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 in the framework. While still empty, this will allow for a more appropriate placing of ‘short cycle’ academic qualifications as well as advanced vocational qualifications, possibly including the master craftsman (*Meister*).

The first stage (universal) learning outcomes descriptors developed for the PQF refer to the following key learning domains:

Figure 2. **First stage generic descriptors (universal)**

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

Source: Adapted from Educational Research Institute (2017).

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

Progress has been made in defining level descriptors for the different education and training subsystems (Educational Research Institute, 2017). The basic distinction between knowledge, skills and social competence is used for the second stage (subsystem) level descriptors, but differs in terms of specificity. For example, the main descriptive categories of the level descriptors for VET are specified as follows:

- (a) knowledge:
 - (i) theories/principles;
 - (ii) phenomena and processes;
 - (iii) organising work;
 - (iv) tools and materials;
- (b) skills:
 - (i) information;
 - (ii) organising work;
 - (iii) tools and materials;
 - (iv) learning and professional development;
- (c) social competence:
 - (i) following rules;
 - (ii) cooperation;
 - (iii) responsibility.

For general education (levels 1 to 4), the same three dimensions are grouped as follows:

- (a) knowledge:
 - (i) language and communication;
 - (ii) mathematics and natural sciences;
 - (iii) social functioning;
- (b) skills:
 - (i) language and communication;
 - (ii) mathematics and natural sciences;
 - (iii) social functioning;
 - (iv) learning;
- (c) social competence:
 - (i) language and communication;
 - (ii) health and the environment;
 - (iii) social functioning.

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 for defining learning outcomes in particular subject-areas of higher education.

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 the main parts of education and training. The core curriculum for general education has been gradually implemented since the 2009/10 school year to 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 is being implemented from the 2012/13 school year, being finalised by 2015/16. Also in this case the core curriculum forms the basis for assessment criteria. As of the 2012/13 academic year, the NQF for higher education applies, 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 showing how they can be assessed. For third cycle studies (doctoral), regulations from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education describe the expected learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016).

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

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.

An intra-ministerial taskforce for lifelong learning strategy was set up to provide overall coordination. Representatives of the Ministries of National Education, Research and Higher Education, Economy, Labour and Social Policy, and Health took part. This taskforce was led by the Ministry of National Education.

A PQF steering committee, reporting to the intra-ministerial taskforce was set up, involving Ministries of National Education, Research and Higher Education, Economy, Labour and Social Policy, Health, Culture and Defence. This committee was coordinated by the Ministry of Research and Higher Education. The Educational Research Institute and the Polish national coordination point provided technical and conceptual support to the work of this committee. All projects supporting the development and implementation of the PQF have been monitored and coordinated by the committee.

Unlike many other countries, the above bodies have not directly included representatives of social partners or civil society. Seen from the outside and compared to other countries, Polish developments can be described as a combination of top-down and research driven. However, two broad consultations have been carried out since 2011 and a many meetings (more than 200) have been organised across the country addressing a wide range of stakeholders.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽²⁾

An important element of the new qualification system is the introduction of a more consistent approach to validation of learning outcomes achieved outside formal education and training. The aim is to increase the flexibility of the education and training system and make it possible to acquire qualifications in different settings and throughout life. The PQF provides a reference point for this approach, signalling that qualifications at all levels can be acquired not only through formal education and training but also through non-formal and informal learning.

The new law introduces a formal definition of validation and specifies the requirements for bodies carrying out validation and certification, the rules for

⁽²⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

obtaining the permit to carry out certification, the principles for quality assurance in validation and certification, and the rules for monitoring processes.

The law seeks to increase the quality and coherence of existing arrangements, notably for vocational education and training and for higher education. The main driver, common for all sectors, is to improve the response of education to labour market needs, particularly in the context of ever-changing demand for skills. It also aims to empower adults by encouraging them to confirm learning obtained at work and throughout life. This latter is particularly important given the relatively low adult learning participation in Poland (compared to the EU average). Currently, the quality of validation arrangements gives rise to concern. While some validation arrangements are high quality, others fail to provide credible documentation and evidence, undermining trust in certificates. The new law seeks to increase the comparability of arrangements and assure overall quality of and trust in validation.

NQF implementation

Institutional arrangements

Formal adoption of the framework in 2015 clarified how the coordination of the qualifications system (including the framework) was to be carried out. While the Ministry of Education is responsible for overall coordination, an advisory stakeholder council was set up in September 2016, based on the rules of the Law on the integrated qualification system. This council includes representatives of the National Chamber of Commerce, representatives of employer organisations and trade union representatives. The task of the council is to give advice on operation and to monitor implementation, ensuring coherence of the solutions chosen.

The Educational Research Institute has played a key role in preparing the technical and conceptual basis of the framework. The 2015 law signals that the institute will also play a role in future implementation of the qualifications system and framework, supporting the ministry in drafting detailed technical and organisational solutions.

The Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange ⁽³⁾ has been appointed as national coordination point for the EQF.

Opening up the framework to the non-formal sector

The December 2015 law ⁽⁴⁾ opens up to the inclusion of non-formal qualifications and introduces necessary procedures ⁽⁵⁾. These criteria and procedures, addressing relevant national and/or international awarding bodies, focus on:

- (a) why the qualification is needed and for whom;
- (b) how the qualification is linked to similar qualifications;
- (c) which are the target groups for the qualification;
- (d) conditions for validation;
- (e) typical use of the qualification;
- (f) entitlements following from the qualification;
- (g) learning outcomes required for the qualification, including sets of individual learning outcomes.

Operational stage

Based on the above, the qualifications framework has now reached an early operational stage. This judgement is based on the following factors:

- (a) a formal, legal basis has been established, clarifying basic governance arrangements and the relationship between stakeholders.
- (b) institutions responsible for the day-to-day coordination of work have been appointed and are actively working on framework implementation.
- (c) the qualification register is now being put in place and gradually extended
- (d) criteria and guidelines for the inclusion and levelling of non-formal qualifications have been developed and published.
- (e) all formal qualifications are being updated using the learning outcomes approach.

⁽³⁾ Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange:
<http://buwilm.edu.pl/eng/index.htm>

⁽⁴⁾ Law 22 December 2015, Articles 9.1, 15.1 and 38.1.

⁽⁵⁾ Educational Research Institute (2016). *How to describe market qualifications for the Polish qualifications system: a guidebook*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.
<http://www.kwalifikacje.edu.pl/en/publications/1148-how-to-describe-market-qualifications-for-the-polish-qualifications-system>

Much work still remains for the PQF to reach a full or advanced operational level. A strong base has been established – technically, conceptually and legally – providing a good point of departure for future developments.

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. An update on the referencing report was presented in December 2016, focusing on important developments in recent years: establishing an integrated register, fine-tuning the governance structure, and qualifications.

Important lessons and future plans

The PQF developments reflect on a broader international context as they represent an effort to combine the introduction of a comprehensive national framework with the 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 in the coming period should be followed closely as it may provide a model for other countries struggling to find ways to bridge and connect education and training sectors and subsectors. Whether this complex model will work in practice, and how it can promote consistent use of learning outcomes across levels and subsystems and sectors, must be monitored in the coming period. The progress made in introducing the learning outcomes approach in the different subsectors of education and training provides a good basis for future developments.

The PQF has now reached an early operational stage and is well placed, technically, conceptually and legally, to continue to develop and become a fully integrated and visible part of the overall Polish education, training and qualifications system. This will require the extensive work carried out since 2010 to be followed up by sufficient political and stakeholder commitment and resources.

Further developments of the integrated qualifications system in Poland include:

- (a) support to external quality assurance bodies;
- (b) developing sectoral qualifications frameworks;

- (c) monitoring the development of the integrated qualifications system;
- (d) dissemination.

Further sources of information:

The Bureau for Academic Recognition and International Exchange acts as the national coordination point: <http://buwilm.edu.pl/eng/index.htm>
[accessed 4.3.2015].

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

Polish national qualifications framework (PQF)

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>Magister</i> Diploma certifying the title of <i>Magister Inzynier</i> Diploma certifying a title equivalent to <i>Magister</i> or <i>Inzynier</i>	7
6	First cycle vocational title Diploma certifying the title of <i>Licencjat</i> Diploma certifying the title of <i>Inzynier</i> Diploma certifying a title equivalent to <i>Licencjat</i> or <i>Inzynier</i>	6
5		5
4	Matura certificate Vocational certificate Vocational diploma	4
3	Vocational certificate Vocational diploma	3
2	Certificate of completing lower secondary school	2
1	Certificate of completing primary school	1

Source: Educational Research Institute (2013).

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

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