

PORTUGAL

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The Portuguese education and training system has undergone a number of major reforms, starting in 2007 with the *Agenda for the reform of Vocational Training*. This led to the development of a national qualifications system, whose main aim was to promote widespread attainment of secondary education as a minimum level of qualification. Enrolment in vocational education and training has increased, while the early school leaving rate and tertiary education attainment have improved, although they have not yet reached the EU average ⁽¹⁾.

Development of the national qualifications system has been underpinned by several instruments aiming to help achieve its objectives: a new institutional model, new opportunities centres ⁽²⁾ (with a role in coordinating adult education and training), the national qualifications catalogue (a strategic management instrument for non-higher national qualifications), and the national qualifications framework (NQF) (ANQ, 2011).

The comprehensive Portuguese qualifications framework (*Quadro Nacional de Qualificações*) (QNQ) is a single reference for classifying all qualifications awarded in the Portuguese education and training system. Established by Decree Law No 396/2007 ⁽³⁾, the framework was published in 2009 ⁽⁴⁾ and came into force in October 2010. It includes eight levels, with level descriptors defined in terms of learning outcomes. 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. The NQF

⁽¹⁾ The early school leaving rate was 17.4% in 2014, compared to the EU average of 11.1%, while the rate of tertiary education attainment was 31.3% compared to the EU average of 37.9% (European Commission, 2015).

⁽²⁾ Since 2013, the new opportunities centres have been replaced by the centres for qualification and vocational education (CQEP) and since 2016 CQEP have been replaced by *Qualifica Centers*.

⁽³⁾ Decree-Law No 396/2007 on the National Qualification System.
http://www.dges.mctes.pt/NR/rdonlyres/90DBE647-5CB6-4846-B88F-101180D9E425/5042/DL396_2007.pdf

⁽⁴⁾ Ministerial Order No 782/2009 on the NQF.
<http://www.catalogo.anqep.gov.pt/boDocumentos/getDocumentos/163>

was linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in 2011 and has been gradually implemented.

Policy objectives

The NQF is seen as ‘both a central anchoring device and a mechanism that drives forward the process of reform’ (ANQ (2011)). Development of the national qualifications system and of the NQF forms part of a broader education and training reform programme initiated in 2007 ⁽⁵⁾, the *New opportunities* initiative and the *Agenda for the reform of vocational training*. These reforms aimed to raise low qualification levels of the whole population (youngsters and adults) ⁽⁶⁾. Specific objectives to which the development of the national qualifications system and framework is expected to contribute include:

- (a) integration between general and vocational education and training offers, based on the principle of double certification, expected to lead to both secondary education attainment and increased employability;
- (b) developing mechanisms for the certification and recognition of informal and non-formal learning, allowing flexible training pathways aimed at increasing participation in lifelong learning; the mechanism for the recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) was strengthened and more people have benefitted from the process;
- (c) organising education and training pathways into short modular units that can be certified independently, aimed at increasing adult learner participation and qualification levels;
- (d) developing an oversight framework and quality control mechanisms, aimed at integrating education and training subsystems; this took the form of the National Agency for Qualifications (now the National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP)) ⁽⁷⁾, which coordinates the implementation of education and vocational training policies for both young people and adults, and manages the system for the recognition, validation and certification of competences;

⁽⁵⁾ Decree Law No 396/2007.

⁽⁶⁾ There have been programmes and investments in qualifications over the past two decades and progress has been made; however, numbers of early school leavers (aged 18 to 24) – although having decreased sharply in past years – are still high (17.4% in 2014) and the working population (aged 24 to 64) having at least upper secondary education was 45.1% in 2015 (Eurostat data).

⁽⁷⁾ Under the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security and the Ministry of Education.

- (e) promoting the relevance, certification and recognition of the education and training offer in line with the needs of the labour market; the national qualifications catalogue and the sector qualification councils are among the solutions linked to this objective;
- (f) strengthening integration between academic and double certification pathways through permeability mechanisms and coordination.

The development of the NQF was seen as a response to the need to integrate and coordinate qualifications from the different education and training subsystems (general education, vocational training and higher education) into a single classification framework. It is also expected to aid recognition of non-formal and informal learning, to improve the legibility, transparency and comparability of qualifications, and to support double certification. The NQF is also seen as a crucial element in creating the conditions for a focus on learning outcomes.

In addition to its national reform role, the NQF aims at improving comparability and transparency of Portuguese qualifications and their understanding abroad by linking them to the EQF. The comprehensive approach to the EQF was seen as an inspiration for the development of the NQF, which adopted the eight-level structure and the level descriptors of the European framework.

In parallel to the NQF, 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, 2010).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The NQF is a comprehensive framework, including all qualifications from the different education and training subsystems, regardless of means of access (basic, secondary and higher education, vocational training and the processes of recognition, validation and certification of competences obtained through non-formal or informal learning). An eight-level reference structure was adopted, following the principles and categories of the EQF.

⁽⁸⁾ The current rate of tertiary attainment at 31.3% (2014) is still below the European Union average (37.9%), but Portugal has made significant progress in recent years. (European Commission, 2015).

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills (cognitive or practical) and attitude. As the term ‘competence’ was already used as an overarching concept within the national qualifications system (defined as ‘recognised capacity to mobilise knowledge, skills and attitudes in contexts of work, professional development, education and personal development’), the choice was made to use ‘attitude’ for the third category of descriptors in the NQF. This is defined as ‘the ability to carry out tasks and solve problems of lesser or greater degrees of complexity and involving various levels of autonomy and responsibility’, and is divided into subdomains responsibility and autonomy⁽⁹⁾.

The learning outcome approach plays an important role in reforming Portuguese education and training and was an underlying principle in the development of the national qualifications catalogue. It is seen as a more adequate response to competence needs in the labour market and of critical importance to recognition of qualifications and understanding their value. The NQF has been a driving force behind incorporation of the learning outcomes approach into the education and training system.

However, although learning outcomes are formally present in the NQF, the approach has not yet been internalised by the different education and training subsystems, and there has not been a thorough national debate to support understanding and appropriation of the concept. There is a diversity of approaches and concepts and the level of implementation varies across subsystems (Cedefop, 2016a). Fine-tuning learning outcomes in qualifications design with the NQF level descriptors is a challenging task and is work in progress: it includes upgrading not only the national qualifications catalogue, but also general education qualifications.

In general education, the *National curriculum of essential competences for basic education* was a national reference document for planning learning activities at both school and class levels until 2011. After revision of the curriculum structure for basic and secondary education (considered too general and abstract) and to improve education quality, new programmes and curriculum outcome targets (*metas curriculares*) were defined for several subjects of basic and secondary education. This followed 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 the subjects, the content to be acquired and skills and general capabilities to be developed. Entry

⁽⁹⁾ Ministerial Order No 782/2009.

into force of the curriculum outcome targets and programmes began in 2013/14 and they have been introduced 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, with about 50% of qualifications having been updated and learning outcomes adjusted to the level descriptors. A new methodology for designing and describing VET qualifications, based on learning outcomes, was prepared and validated and is already being implemented. This methodology applies to levels 2, 4 and 5 of the NQF.

Higher education institutions are responsible for implementing the framework and implementing learning outcomes within their study programmes, so the process differs from one institution to another. According to a recent Cedefop study (Cedefop, 2016a), the accreditation agency A3ES for the higher education sector does not emphasise the importance of learning outcomes in the accreditation process.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

Initial work on the NQF was carried out by the former 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.

Work during the referencing process was coordinated by a steering committee chaired by the National Agency for Qualifications (ANQ) and comprising bodies involved in the regulation of qualifications and quality assurance in education and training ⁽¹⁰⁾. There was also a technical working

⁽¹⁰⁾ The General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES); the former General Directorate for Curriculum Innovation and Development (DGIDC); the General Directorate for Employment and Labour Relations (DGERT); and the Agency for the Accreditation and Assessment of Higher Education (A3ES) were also part of the steering committee.

group led by ANQ and composed of staff drawn from the bodies represented in the steering committee. Other stakeholders were involved or consulted in the process ⁽¹¹⁾.

The NQF is currently under the responsibility of three ministries – the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education. NQF coordination is now shared between the National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP, previously ANQ) ⁽¹²⁾, and the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES), involved in qualifications at levels 5 to 8 ⁽¹³⁾. ANQEP has been nominated to host the national coordination point for the European qualifications framework (EQF NCP), the leading structure for NQF implementation ⁽¹⁴⁾. Depending on the issue, the EQF NCP collaborates horizontally with other relevant bodies (such as the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) and the General Directorate for Employment and Labour Relations (DGERT)), working flexibly and through consultation ⁽¹⁵⁾. The body consulted on the general education qualifications is the General Directorate for Education (DGE). The current governance structure does not foresee any human resources dedicated exclusively to the EQF NCP, and the staff working on the NQF are also involved in other technical departments and services of ANQEP and DGES. This arrangement allows for flexibility and for synergies to develop, though the disadvantage is that it may lead to less commitment from the relevant parties ⁽¹⁶⁾.

⁽¹¹⁾ Other stakeholders involved in the referencing process were the central coordination unit of the Employment and Vocational Training Observatory; the oversight committee for the *New opportunities* initiative and the national qualification system; other public bodies, education and training providers, practitioners and experts (ANQ, 2011).

⁽¹²⁾ <http://www.anqep.gov.pt/default.aspx>

⁽¹³⁾ DGES is under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education and is involved in the coordination of the NQF for qualifications at levels 5 to 8.

⁽¹⁴⁾ The responsibilities of the EQF NCP include: referencing the national qualification levels to the EQF and ensuring transparency of methodology used; providing access to information and guidance on how national qualifications are referenced to the EQF; encouraging participation of all interested entities (higher education and vocational training and education establishments, social partners, sectors and experts).

⁽¹⁵⁾ Scheduled meetings may occur, depending on the circumstances and needs. For example, several meetings were recently held between the ANQEP, the IEFP and the DGERT to elaborate a proposal to review the NQF concerning level 5.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

ANQEP is also supported by 16 sector qualifications councils involved in defining qualifications and competences, as well as in including new qualifications in the national qualifications catalogue and updating existing ones. The councils are composed of social partners, training providers from the national qualifications system, entities responsible for regulating professions; public structures that oversee business sectors; technology and innovation centres, and companies.

The authorities currently responsible for quality assurance of qualifications are ANQEP, the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES), the General Directorate for Education (DGE), the General Directorate for Employment and Labour Relations (DGERT), and the Agency for the Accreditation and Assessment of Higher Education (A3ES).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁷⁾

Several public policies and initiatives have been developed for validating non-formal and informal learning in Portugal. In 2001, a comprehensive national system for the recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) was introduced in general and vocational education. Its main goal is to increase the levels of school education and of vocational qualification in the country, mainly among those of working age. During 2012-13, major changes were introduced into the system. In early 2014, 450 new opportunities centres, in charge of validation and recognition of competences (for people over 18), were replaced by a new network of centres for qualification and vocational training (*Centros para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional*, CQEP). These, in turn, were replaced in 2016 by *Qualifica Centres*: there are currently around 300 such centres carrying out RVCC, and their activity is managed by ANQEP. The new network assumes similar functions as the previous new opportunities centres, but also targets young people (age 15 or over), 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:

⁽¹⁷⁾ 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., forthcoming).

- (a) education RVCC process, aimed at obtaining a school leaving qualification (levels 1, 2 and 3 of the NQF/EQF);
- (b) professional RVCC process, aimed at obtaining a vocational qualification (offers a school and professional certification,; levels 2 and 4 of the NQF/EQF).

Learners can acquire basic or upper secondary level education certificates and vocational qualifications from levels 1 to 4 in the NQF that 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 standards and training reference framework) and integrated into the national catalogue of qualifications.

At higher education level (levels 5 to 8 of the NQF/EQF), 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 ⁽¹⁸⁾ sets a limit for validation processes up to one third of the total number of ECTS credits relevant for a particular course. General rules for validation apply to all higher education institutions, complemented by specific validation procedures established by each institution.

NQF 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 (ANQEP), under the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security and the Ministry of Education – was established in 2007 to coordinate implementation of education and training policies for young people and adults, and to develop the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC). The National Council for Vocational Training was set up as a tripartite body responsible for approving profiles and the referential system for training. In higher education, the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) was set up in 2007. These two entities have important quality assurance functions.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Decree Law No 115/2013.

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. This defines an occupational profile for each qualification, with 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 subject contents at these specific education levels.

The NQF has now reached an operational stage (Cedefop, 2016b), and is already considered a permanent feature of the national qualifications system ⁽¹⁹⁾. The legal framework is in place, qualifications have been assigned to levels, and quality assurance arrangements have been implemented. All VET is already organised around the NQF: databases ⁽²⁰⁾ are organised considering the NQF structure and access to financial support also takes the framework into consideration. Education and training stakeholders are involved in implementing the NQF. The framework is becoming increasingly visible to learners, parents, employers and employees, training providers and guidance experts, but visibility could be further improved. Information on the NQF is provided through education providers and awarding bodies, the relevant ministries, the *Qualifica Centres* (the former centres for qualification and vocational education), as well as the EQF NCP.

In general education, diploma and certificate templates follow an identical layout for primary, lower and upper secondary education, and NQF/EQF levels are expected to be indicated in certificates and diplomas once this is approved by the Ministry of Education. In VET, and for qualifications acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning, the NQF level is indicated in the national catalogue of qualifications and in all certificates and diplomas. EQF levels are indicated only on some qualifications, but this could be extended once the existing ANQEP proposal is approved. The NQF is less visible in higher

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

⁽²⁰⁾ The national qualifications catalogue:
<http://www.catalogo.anqep.gov.pt/Qualificacoes>

education, where institutions can autonomously approve models for their diplomas. Some may indicate the qualification level, but that is not usually the case: it is mandatory to indicate the qualification level only in the diploma supplement.

There is still a need to discuss and raise awareness of key new concepts, such as learning outcomes, among different stakeholders, and to disseminate information to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, especially in the labour market, where the NQF is not well-known. The inclusion of NQF/EQF levels on all certificates and diplomas at all levels of education and training could increase awareness of the framework among end-users.

Referencing to the EQF

Portugal referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in 2011. The process started in 2009 and the results were presented in two separate reports: the *Report on the referencing of the national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework* addressed qualifications at levels 1 to 5 of the NQF, and the *Report on the referencing of the framework for higher education qualifications in Portugal (FHEQ-Portugal)* addressed levels 5 to 8.

Important lessons and future plans

Portugal took the decision to adopt the eight EQF levels and the EQF level descriptors in setting up the 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 developing the NQF users' guide, a support for NQF users aimed to make it easier to evaluate the match between national qualifications and the NQF levels and to guide the inclusion of new qualifications in the NQF ⁽²¹⁾. An ebook *NQF: interpretation guide* was also published by ANQEP ⁽²²⁾. This aims to: support design of qualifications based on

⁽²¹⁾ Understanding NQF: users support guide. A summary is included in the *Referencing report of the NQF to the EQF* (ANQ, 2011).

⁽²²⁾ http://www.ctesp.anqep.gov.pt/PDF/Guia_interpretativo.pdf

learning outcomes, guide inclusion of new qualifications in the NQF; contribute to more effective appropriation of the NQF by users; and encourage participation of 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 qualification levels. This work is still in progress but gained momentum with the creation of a new methodology for designing and describing VET qualifications based on learning outcomes; the methodology is in the implementation phase ⁽²³⁾. The learning outcomes approach could be further strengthened by providing adequate training to teachers and trainers ⁽²⁴⁾ to assist them in designing curricula and assessment methods based on learning outcomes, and by developing a common understanding of learning outcomes among different education and training subsystems and stakeholders (Cedefop, 2016a).

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 higher education 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. Managing the coexistence of two types of training leading to level 5 qualifications (one corresponding to higher education studies (TeSP) ⁽²⁵⁾ and the other corresponding to post-secondary non-tertiary studies (CET)) has been a challenge ⁽²⁶⁾. One of the issues tackled in the near future may be review of the NQF concerning level 5.

A strategy is being prepared, in articulation with the General Directorate for Education (DGE), for including explicit reference to the EQF level in national certificates, diplomas and Europass documents. Proposals are currently awaiting approval from the relevant ministries.

⁽²³⁾ <http://www.erasmusmais.pt/erasmusmais/images/erasmusmais/outras-iniciativas/ECVET/guiametodologicoRA.pdf>

⁽²⁴⁾ ANQEP organised a pilot training course for VET teachers and trainers (around 60 people, June-July 2016). Based on this experience, it intends to disseminate this training to other groups across the country.

⁽²⁵⁾ TeSP are short-cycle higher technical courses launched during the 2014/15 academic year. Aiming to promote links between higher education and the business sector, they have a strong technical and vocational component, including on-the-job training.

⁽²⁶⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs*.

Further source of information

The National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP) is the national coordination point for the EQF in Portugal. Information is available on the ANQEP website, especially on European tools: <http://www.anqep.gov.pt/default.aspx>

Portuguese national qualifications framework (QNQ)

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree (<i>Doutoramento</i>)	8
7	Master degree (<i>Mestrado</i>)	7
6	Bachelor degree (<i>Licenciatura</i>)	6
5	Diploma in technological specialisation (<i>Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica</i>)	5
4	Secondary education and professional certification (Ensino secundário obtido por percursos de dupla certificação) Secondary education and professional internship; minimum six months (<i>Ensino secundário vocacionado para prosseguimento de estudos de nível superior acrescido de estágio profissional — mínimo de seis meses</i>)	4
3	Secondary education (<i>Ensino secundário vocacionado para prosseguimento de estudos de nível superior</i>)	3
2	Third cycle of basic education (<i>3º ciclo do ensino básico obtido no ensino regular</i>) Third cycle of basic education and professional certification (<i>3º ciclo do ensino básico obtido por percursos de dupla certificação</i>)	2
1	Second cycle of basic education (<i>2º ciclo do ensino básico</i>)	1

Source: ANQ, 2016.

List of abbreviations

ANQ	<i>Agência Nacional para a Qualificação</i> [National Agency for Qualifications]
ANQEP	<i>Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional</i> [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	<i>Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Ensino Superior</i> [Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
QNQ	<i>Quadro Nacional de Qualificações</i> [Portuguese qualifications framework]
RVCC	system for recognising non-formal and informal learning
VET	vocational education and training

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