

SLOVAKIA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Slovakia has a comparatively low rate of early leavers from education and training (6.9% in 2015, compared to the EU average of 11.0%), but is below the EU average for several other key indicators. A current challenge is a need to improve educational outcomes, especially among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Improving the attractiveness of the teaching profession and the education of teachers, as well as strengthening early childhood education and care, are seen as key aspects in tackling this challenge. All levels of the education and training system have been undergoing reform and the new government is preparing a 10-year education strategy (European Commission, 2016).

Work on the Slovak qualifications framework (SKKR) has been under way for some time, based on a 2009 government decision on European qualifications framework (EQF) implementation ⁽¹⁾. The Act on Lifelong Learning of 2009 ⁽²⁾, amended in 2012, stipulated the legal background for development of a national qualifications system and framework. A strong tradition of formal education with a firmly established education and training branch structure initially contributed to reluctance to accept a framework development; in the past few years, however, more engaged actions have been taken to develop the framework and the national qualifications register (NQR). This has been stimulated by post-crisis labour market transformation that highlighted the gap between labour market requirements and the knowledge and skills of graduates (State Vocational Education Institute, EQF NCP, 2015). The tasks related to the development of the SKKR became a part of the national reform programme of the Slovak Republic in 2012.

⁽¹⁾ Government Decision No 105/2009 (available in Slovak).
http://www.rokovania.sk/File.aspx/ViewDocumentHtml/Uznesenie-5819?prefixFile=u_

⁽²⁾ Act of 1 December 2009 on lifelong learning and amendments to certain acts (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic).
<https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/4125.pdf>

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, this initial NQF proposal was deemed to be too much shaped around the formal education system (State Vocational Education Institute, EQF NCP, 2015), and in 2013 strategies for revision were proposed, along with involvement of other actors and social partners.

The State Vocational Education Institute (*Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania – ŠIOV*) launched a national project under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, aiming to develop a national system of qualifications ⁽³⁾. One of the outcomes of this project was revision of the SKKR grid; this work, together with the methodology for linking qualifications to the SKKR levels, was completed at the end of 2014.

The first phase of SKKR development was finalised in 2015 and the EQF referencing report was presented in the EQF advisory group in December 2015. An updated report following recommendations of the advisory group is expected to be submitted in the first quarter of 2017. As with most other young frameworks, further development and implementation of the SKKR is work in progress.

Policy objectives

Development of the NQF in Slovakia is taking place as part of a more complex process of reform in VET and lifelong learning ⁽⁴⁾. Apart from its main function of classification of qualifications, resulting from the hierarchical division of the qualifications system into levels, the SKKR is seen as having a threefold role:

- (a) communication: to provide transparent information on national qualifications, their characteristics and relationships;

⁽³⁾ The project is jointly financed from European Union (EU) Structural Funds. Information about the project is available at: <http://www.kvalifikacie.sk/zakladne-informacie>

⁽⁴⁾ This concerns the implementation of dual education, development of the national qualifications register, development of the national occupations register, as well as reform of the national qualifications system in the context of lifelong learning. A new Act on lifelong learning is currently being prepared.

- (b) transformation: gradually revising the recognition and validation system and leading to better coordination of lifelong learning;
- (c) regulation: to monitor and regulate the description of qualifications and their levelling, as well as the system of recognition and validation of qualifications.

There is also general consensus in the country about the role of the framework in promoting lifelong learning, improving the quality of education at all levels, and promoting student and workforce mobility.

Among the anticipated benefits and impacts of SKKR implementation are:

- (a) better education system transparency, both for individuals and employers, as well as for international comparison;
- (b) increased transparency of qualifications, through their description in terms of learning outcomes rather than inputs;
- (c) better match between education and training and the needs of the labour market through a more demand-oriented education system;
- (d) strengthened relationships between all stakeholders involved in education;
- (e) modernisation of education through the application of quality principles in the process of acquiring qualifications;
- (f) increased quality in the processes of identification, validation and recognition of qualifications, and developing general principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (State Vocational Education Institute, EQF NCP, 2015).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The revised SKKR ⁽⁵⁾ includes all qualifications: general education, VET, higher education, those outside the formal education system and those gained through validation of non-formal and informal learning. It is an eight-level framework, with level descriptors defined in learning outcomes, covering knowledge (general and professional), skills (cognitive and practical) and competence (responsibility, autonomy and social competences). The architecture of the SKKR consists of the framework grid and a catalogue of qualification cards describing full and partial

⁽⁵⁾ The website of the national qualifications system, including the SKKR:
<http://www.kvalifikacie.sk>

qualifications ⁽⁶⁾. Qualifications were assigned to SKKR levels following analysis of the learning outcomes set in the qualification standards, and their comparison with the national descriptors.

The SKKR comprises four types of qualification, reflecting the educational pathways:

- (a) general education qualifications: refer to the level of education and entitle the holder to continue his/her studies at a higher level; they provide the holder with general knowledge, skills and competences;
- (b) vocational qualifications: awarded in formal secondary VET, they are closely linked to the level of education and represent the first qualification an individual can achieve in formal education;
- (c) higher education qualifications: representing a level of education and a qualification;
- (d) occupational qualifications: awarded outside the formal system, as a result of courses, working experience.

The learning outcomes approach has been recognised as part of the reform agenda. The 'shift to learning outcomes' policy is well embedded in national discourse and partly also in legislation. The approach is being integrated into all new developments across the various parts of the education system, for example in relation 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 better match between content of education and labour market demands;
- (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. Although this can be seen as a reflection of a shift towards the learning outcomes approach, substantial changes in

⁽⁶⁾ According to the Act on lifelong learning (2009), a full qualification entitles its holder to perform all tasks within an occupation, whereas a partial qualification allows performance of one or a limited set of tasks within a relevant occupation. Full qualification may comprise one or more partial qualifications.

programming and curriculum development will need more time and deeper discourse about the learning outcomes approach foundation (Cedefop, 2016).

The learning outcomes approach is being reinforced in VET through the VET Act of 2009 ⁽⁷⁾ and curriculum reform. Two-level educational VET programming was introduced, with performance standards formulated within State educational programmes, and requiring schools to develop learning outcomes within school programmes, in cooperation with regional partners. Between 2013 and 2015, qualifications standards were elaborated in the frame of the European Social Fund (ESF) project *Development of the national qualifications system* by sector councils, associating different players from education and labour market (educators, employers, chambers).

In higher education, the Ministry of Education adopted in 2013 the *Criteria for the accreditation of higher education study programmes* ⁽⁸⁾ as well as other documents related to the performance of higher education institutions; the learning outcomes approach is now part of the criteria for assessing the quality of higher education institutions and for obtaining study programme accreditation. In 2014, the Higher Education Act defined a field of study based on the extent of knowledge, skills and competences forming the graduate's profile. In November 2016, the ministry started the process of public consultations on future reforms in Slovak education ⁽⁹⁾. The steps envisaged include revision of the system of study fields in line with the learning outcomes approach and their reduction in number to increase flexibility in line with SKKR. Specific measures based on the consultations are expected to be published in the first half of 2017.

⁽⁷⁾ Act of 23 April 2009 on VET and amendments to certain acts (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic).
http://www.tnuni.sk/fileadmin/dokumenty/univerzita/dolezite_dokumenty/Zakon_184_2009_o_odbornom_vzdelavani.pdf

⁽⁸⁾ <http://www.minedu.sk/kriteria-pouzivane-pri-vyjadrovani-sa-akreditacnej-komisie/>

⁽⁹⁾ The national programme for the development of education (*Learning Slovakia*) is based on the goals of the Manifesto of the Government for 2016-20. The main goals of the reform in higher education focus on quality assurance, flexible response to the labour market needs, internationalisation, and accessibility of university studies for all.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

Work on the initial NQF, following Government Decision No 105/2009 on a proposal for implementation of the EQF, was started and coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic. The national coordination point for EQF (NCP) was created at that time and, until 2011, was under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education. An interministerial group for the implementation of EQF was set up to develop the NQF grid, and cooperation with the national team of Bologna experts was established to ensure coordination between the NQF and Bologna implementation.

Revision of the initial NQF was closely linked to development of the national qualifications system. Stakeholder involvement from the world of work was vital, including employers' chambers, unions, confederations and other professional associations. Between 2011 and 2014, the NCP moved to the National Institute for Lifelong Learning and, since February 2014, it has been within the State Vocational Education Institute (ŠIOV), the coordinator body of the national project for the development of the national qualifications system. The role of the NCP is primarily one of coordination, monitoring and technical advice. The Ministry of Education maintains overall competence and responsibility for NQF development and implementation.

The current governance of the SKKR consists of:

- (a) a working group for the development of the NQF, comprising experts from educational institutions at all levels and employer representatives. The working group is responsible for developing SKKR descriptors and levelling processes;
- (b) a national team of experts comprising representatives of institutions governed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport⁽¹⁰⁾ and social partner representatives⁽¹¹⁾. Its role is to act as an advisory body, ensuring social dialogue;

⁽¹⁰⁾ The National Institute of Lifelong Learning, the State School Inspection, the National Institute of Education and the National Institute of Certified Measurement of Education.

⁽¹¹⁾ The Federation of Employers' Associations, the National Union of Employers and the Confederation of Trade Unions.

- (c) the National Council for Education and Qualifications (NCEQ) ⁽¹²⁾, a supra-sectoral national authority composed of representatives of all sectoral ministries, professional and employers' organisations, State and regional administration, and associations of schools. The NCEQ is the highest approval and monitoring body of the NQF. Its work is also directly related to the work of the sector councils;
- (d) sector councils composed of representatives of all stakeholders (national and regional authorities, employers, representatives of trade unions, and educators). The sector councils have a key role in developing, monitoring and updating national occupations and qualifications standards ⁽¹³⁾.

The body responsible for quality assurance is the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, with the social partners also involved.

The main strength of the current governance structure of the Slovak NQF is the active participation of stakeholders, though this requires effective communication strategies yet to be developed. Activities related to the introduction and implementation of the SKKR were mainly project-based, but in 2016 ŠIOV was provided with a budget from the Ministry of Education, ensuring sustainability and continuity of work on issues related to the further development of SKKR and the qualifications system.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁴⁾

There is currently no national system for validating non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) in Slovakia. The underlying principles are set out in the 2009 Act

⁽¹²⁾ A legal framework for the National Council for Education and Qualifications is expected to be defined by the new Act on lifelong learning.

⁽¹³⁾ There are 24 sector councils in Slovakia, with a rather wide scope of responsibilities and competences, such as development and monitoring of the national occupations register and the national qualifications register, communication between the labour market and the world of education, and establishing partnerships for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning. Their role is defined in the Act No 5/2014 on employment services and on amendment of certain laws (<https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2004/5>).

⁽¹⁴⁾ 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).

on Lifelong Learning, which created some of the conditions for gradual development of a validation system. The development of the national qualifications system has introduced a new approach to the description of qualifications, based on learning outcomes.

However, neither the SKKR nor the national qualifications system is ready to be used for validation of NFIL. For example, qualification standards were approved by the National Council for Education and Qualification but they cannot yet be used for validation of NFIL because they are not yet embedded in the relevant legislation. Instead, earlier set standards placed in the information system of further education ⁽¹⁵⁾, created prior to the development of the national qualifications system, are still being used for validation according to the 2009 Act on Lifelong Learning.

There is also a lack of unified terminology contributing to misunderstanding, especially in relation to the international discourse. The term ‘non-formal’ is often used with reference to standards and validation, but ‘non-formal education’ is considered equal to ‘further education’ leading to partial or full qualifications. Therefore, the validation practices presently used refer mainly to qualifications obtained by accredited further learning programmes, rather than to validation of non-formal and informal learning. Individuals with five years of practical experience can apply for examination in authorised institutions and can receive a certificate confirming compliance with qualification standards. These certificates are not the same as those issued from formal education because they do not relate to the level of education; they give access to further study at the same (not higher) education level. New legislation is considered necessary to support the development of validation more appropriately.

Vocational qualifications in Slovakia are currently not based on units and a credit system is not used. However, a unit-based approach to designing qualifications, also introducing modularised provision of VET, has been advocated in ESF-funded analytical studies ⁽¹⁶⁾ and is expected to materialise within the next phases of development of the national qualifications system.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Available at: <http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleInstitutions.aspx>

⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, Vantuch, J. et al. (2014): *Analýza Európskeho kvalifikačného rámca a Národných kvalifikačných rámcov vo vybraných krajinách EÚ [Analysis of EQF and NQFs in selected EU countries]*. Available at: http://www.tvorbansk.sk/files/Analiza_EKR_NKR_EU.pdf (quoted in European Commission et al., forthcoming).

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. A working group was created in November 2015 to prepare a new Act on Lifelong Learning, which is expected to address terminological issues (in particular concerning the conceptualisation of ‘qualifications’) and also to support validation of NFIL better (such as by addressing validity and reliability of validation processes and a stronger focus on validation tools). A follow-up project on further development of the national qualifications system will also focus on validation processes, including quality assurance procedures.

NQF implementation

NQF development in Slovakia has been a lengthy process that involved a range of different stakeholders and was carried out within wider reforms aimed at the creation of a national system of qualifications. This system consists of two pillars, the NQF and the national qualifications register (NQR)⁽¹⁷⁾; development of the two was closely related. The description of qualifications in terms of qualification standards forms the content of the national qualifications register; their levelling is the content of SKKR.

The framework has been designed to be comprehensive, with clearly defined objectives. The SKKR grid was completed and a methodology for linking qualifications to SKKR levels was proposed and tested on a first set of qualifications. The methodology was then revised and approved by the National Council for Education and Qualifications in 2015. Qualifications were levelled to SKKR based on the ‘best fit’ principle, following analysis of learning outcomes defined in qualification standards and their comparison with national descriptors. This methodology was also used by the sector council members and their sectoral working groups as a tool for defining learning outcomes and better understanding of the whole process.

⁽¹⁷⁾ The national qualifications register (NQR) was developed within an ESF-funded project. The website of the national qualifications system can be found at: www.kvalifikacie.sk

The NQR has 'qualification cards' ⁽¹⁸⁾ as its main units, with identified qualifications described in terms of: general information (how to acquire the qualification, relation to an occupation, relation to education, evidence of an acquired qualification, the SKKR level); a qualification standard, which contains categories and subcategories of knowledge, skills and competences; an assessment standard, containing information on assessment criteria, methods and tools; and methodological guidance about the requirements for exams for validation. By November 2015, one thousand qualifications aligned to the SKKR were described and included in the NQR ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The basic framework for the development of NQR was the national occupations register (NOR), and synchronising the two tools is a key element in the implementation of the SKKR. The NQR also has a role in quality assurance at all levels of lifelong learning.

Presentation of the referencing report in the EQF advisory group marked the completion of the first stage of SKKR implementation (2009-15), though implementation of the framework is a gradual process which will continue. Further work on expansion of the register and refinement of the already set standards is expected to be achieved through a new ESF-funded project. Evaluation of the functionality of the SKKR and of the levelling process started at the end of 2015 ⁽²⁰⁾. It analysed 586 qualifications from the SKKR and compared the Slovak system of levelling with the systems in Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Slovenia. The preliminary results were presented by the NCP working group in November 2016. They included recommendations concerning the consistent use of learning outcomes and differentiating in levelling occupational qualifications and those from formal education. The recommendations will be used in developing the SKKR and NQR.

The national coordination point has started to disseminate information about the framework to increase its visibility. It has established cooperation with the

⁽¹⁸⁾ The development of qualification cards is the responsibility of working groups within the sector councils.

⁽¹⁹⁾ The number of qualifications distributed by levels of SKKR are: SKKR Level 2, 34 qualifications; SKKR Level 3, 310 qualifications; SKKR Level 4, 262 qualifications; SKKR Level 5, 72 qualifications; SKKR Level 6, 139 qualifications; SKKR Level 7, 181 qualifications; SKKR Level 8, 2 qualifications.

⁽²⁰⁾ State Vocational Education Institute (2016). *Comparative analysis of levelling qualifications to SKKR levels and national qualifications frameworks in selected EU countries* [unpublished].

Euroguidance centre and participates in its activities. Employers and sectoral bodies, trade unions and education and training providers are already aware of the SKKR as they have been engaged in its development. The next step, which will make the framework better known among students and parents, will be indicating NQF and EQF levels on certificates and diplomas, once the referencing to the EQF is completed.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing report of the Slovak qualifications framework towards the European qualifications framework was presented in the EQF advisory group in December 2015. The report covered the first phase in the development of the framework (2009-15), but further progress and clarifications were considered necessary. The updated version of the report is expected to be submitted in the first part of 2017.

Important lessons and future plans

Important progress has been achieved in developing the SKKR in the past few years. A comprehensive framework with a clear structure and ambitious objectives has been put in place, and one thousand qualifications, ranging from levels 2 to 8, have been described and assigned to NQF levels. The next step is submission of an updated report addressing the recommendations of the EQF advisory group. A clearer conceptual framework is necessary, particularly a consistent approach to the conceptualisation of 'qualifications' and other key concepts, as well as better clarification of the links between different tools and systems used in the country (SKKR, NQR, NOR, different standards, full and partial qualifications).

Revision of the Law on Lifelong Learning is currently underway and will address terminological and conceptual issues. More time is needed to establish quality assurance procedures appropriately and better address higher education qualifications, with stronger involvement of higher education stakeholders. Verification of the levelling of qualifications to the SKKR and revision of the functionality of the framework are envisaged.

The development and further implementation of the SKKR is seen as not only an opportunity to unify terminology and find a common language between the different subsystems, but also to systematise the classification of qualifications, and to achieve separation between recognition and validation

processes, on the one hand, and education attainment, on the other. Some of the challenges lying ahead are to establish effective links between formal, non-formal and informal pathways to qualifications, and to develop a trustworthy system for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

One of the fundamental questions is the fragmentation of the SKKR into subframeworks to achieve the comparability of learning pathways. Analysis of levelling of qualification cards against SKKR opened the way for a debate on the creation of up to five subframeworks, depending on the educational path/recognition of qualifications: for general education; for VET; for higher (tertiary) education; for non-formal learning pathways (further education or learning outcomes achieved by other ways); and for international/sectoral qualifications.

Conditions in Slovakia are favourable for the implementation of the learning outcome approach, and the philosophy is widely accepted. The main barriers are related to identification of learning outcomes and translation into practice. Deeper understanding is needed of the impact of learning outcomes on learner performance, as well as establishing correct assessment procedures. Adequate expertise, teaching materials and professional assistance are required. There is a lack of experts from the world of work able to translate workplace requirements into the language of education, and capacity building for employers is crucial to securing relevance of learning outcomes for the labour market (Cedefop, 2016).

Further source of information (available in Slovak):

[URLs accessed 23.11.2016]

Website of the national qualifications system: <http://www.kvalifikacie.sk/>

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

The State Vocational Education Institute (ŠIOV) – EQF national coordination point:
<http://www.siov.sk/index.php/sk/>

Proposed Slovak qualifications framework (SKKR)

SKKR levels	Types of qualifications
8	Diploma – <i>Vysokoškolský diplom</i> Certificate of State exam – <i>Vysvedčenie o štátnej skúške</i> Diploma supplement – <i>Dodatok k diplomu</i>
7	Diploma – <i>Vysokoškolský diplom</i> Certificate of State exam – <i>Vysvedčenie o štátnej skúške</i> Diploma supplement – <i>Dodatok k diplomu</i>
6	Diploma – <i>Vysokoškolský diplom</i> Certificate of State exam – <i>Vysvedčenie o štátnej skúške</i> Diploma supplement – <i>Dodatok k diplomu</i>
4-5*	<i>Maturita</i> certificate – <i>Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške</i> Certificate of apprenticeship – <i>Výučný list</i>
4-5**	Certificate of final exam – <i>Vysvedčenie o záverečnej skúške</i> <i>Absolutorium</i> diploma – <i>Absolventský diplom</i>
4	<i>Maturita</i> certificate – <i>Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške</i>
3-4*	<i>Maturita</i> certificate – <i>Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške</i> Certificate of apprenticeship – <i>Výučný list</i>
2-3*	Certificate of final exam – <i>Vysvedčenie o záverečnej skúške</i> Certificate of apprenticeship – <i>Výučný list</i>
2	Certificate with supplement – <i>Vysvedčenie s doložkou</i>
1	Certificate with supplement – <i>Vysvedčenie s doložkou</i>

(*) Depending on qualification.

(**) Secondary vocational school, conservatory.

Source: Adapted from the *Referencing report of the Slovak qualifications framework towards the European qualifications framework. Annex 2* (State Vocational Education Institute; EQF NCP, 2015).

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
NCEQ	National Council for Education and Qualifications
NFIL	non-formal and informal learning
NOR	national occupations register
NQR	national qualifications register
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework in the European higher education area
ŠIOV	Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania [State Vocational Education Institute]
SKKR	<i>Slovenský kvalifikačný rámec</i> [Slovak qualifications framework]
VET	vocational education and training

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<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>

European Commission (2016). *Education and training monitor 2016: Slovakia*.

https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2016-sk_en.pdf

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Slovakia*.

State Vocational Education Institute; EQF NCP (2015). *Referencing report of the Slovak qualifications framework towards the European qualifications framework*.