

THE NETHERLANDS

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The Dutch Government gave its support to setting up a comprehensive qualifications framework for the Netherlands (NLQF) in September 2011. This framework was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in October 2011. The NLQF builds on and integrates the qualifications framework for higher education which was self-certified to the European higher education area in 2009.

The eight-level framework covers two main groups of qualifications. First, those regulated by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Second, qualifications awarded outside public regulation and developed by stakeholders (mainly) in the labour market. Since 2012, some progress has been made in addressing this latter group and 30 qualifications are currently (December 2016) levelled to the NLQF ⁽¹⁾.

This emphasis on the double character of the national qualifications system – where private and public providers interact and supplement each other – is an important defining feature of the NLQF. The Ministry of Education is currently working on a legal proposal aiming at including national qualifications framework (NQF) and EQF levels in national qualifications and certification documents (date of adoption to be confirmed). The NLQF has been operational since 2012.

Policy objectives

Development of the NLQF started in January 2009. Work progressed rapidly and became operational in 2012. The NLQF rests on two pillars. The first is qualifications regulated by the public sector (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation and the Ministry of Healthcare, Welfare and Sports). The second pillar includes ‘other qualifications’, notably those awarded by the private sector outside the formal

⁽¹⁾ Register of qualifications awarded outside public regulation and levelled to the NLQF: <http://www.nlqf.nl/register> [accessed 14 December 2016].

system and related to the labour market. These often have a strong ‘qualifying’ power in the labour market and their inclusion in the NLQF is expected to increase their visibility and further strengthen their value. The inclusion and classification of these qualifications take place at the request of the bodies responsible for awarding the diplomas and certificates; this is generally also the body which provides the learning programme leading to the qualification.

The NLQF (van der Sanden et al.; 2012), resting on these two pillars, aims at:

- (a) enabling people of all ages and in different situations to identify their level of education and training to find an appropriate education and training programme where they can use their abilities efficiently;
- (b) enabling employers and individuals to understand the levels of existing national qualifications and international qualifications (through the EQF) and how they relate to each other;
- (c) showing how different qualifications contribute to improving workers’ skills in the labour market.

The main objectives are:

- (a) increase transparency within Dutch education;
- (b) increase understanding of qualifications within Europe;
- (c) increase qualification level comparability;
- (d) stimulate seeing learning outcomes as building blocks of qualifications;
- (e) promote lifelong learning;
- (f) increase the transparency of learning routes;
- (g) increase understanding of qualifications levels across the labour market;
- (h) aid communication between stakeholders in education and employment.

It is clearly stated that the NLQF has no role in reforming Dutch education and training, in regulating transfer and access, or in entitlements to qualifications and degrees. The framework is understood as a systematic arrangement of existing qualifications aiming at transparency and increased comparability. Whether the NQF will move from being a purely descriptive mechanism to an instrument supporting further development of Dutch education and training remains to be seen. Involving the private sector can be seen as moving beyond a purely descriptive role.

Levels and the use of learning outcomes

The NLQF operates with one entry level (lower than EQF 1) and eight qualifications levels. All levels are defined on the basis of learning outcomes. The following key-principles are emphasised:

- (a) levels do not refer to, and are not defined by, education sectors;
- (b) NLQF levels are not referenced to degrees or titles (meaning, for example, that a qualification at level 6 does not automatically belong to higher education and the achievement of this qualification does not give automatic entitlement to a bachelor degree);
- (c) all NLQF levels are open to all qualifications of all education sectors.

The learning outcomes approach used to describe the nine levels is based on the following elements.

Table 1 **Level descriptor in the Dutch national qualifications framework (NLQF)**

NLQF descriptors				
Context				
The context descriptions of the levels are used along with the described knowledge to determine the grade of difficulty of the skills.				
Knowledge				
Knowledge is the totality of facts, principles, theories and ways of working related to an occupation or a knowledge domain.				
Skills				
Cognitive abilities (logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical abilities (psychomotor skills in applying methods, materials, tools and instruments) applied within a given context				
Applying knowledge	Problem-solving skills	Learning and development skills	Information skills	Communication skills
Reproduce, analyse, integrate, evaluate, combine and apply knowledge in an occupation or a knowledge domain.	Recognise or identify and solve problems.	Personal development, autonomously or under supervision.	Obtain, collect, process, combine, analyse and assess information.	Communicate based on conventions relevant to the context.
Responsibility and independence				
The proven ability to collaborate with others and to take responsibility for own work or study results or of others.				

Source: Dutch referencing report, 2012 (van der Sanden, 2012).

Table 1 demonstrates the influence of the EQF descriptors, but differs in some important respects. As in several other countries, making context explicit has been seen as important. The subdomains introduced for skills can be seen as a way specifying the descriptors and making them more relevant to the Dutch context. They can also be seen as reflecting Dutch experiences in applying learning outcomes, for example in VET (upper secondary vocational education (*middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*) (MBO) in recent years.

The learning outcomes, competence-oriented approach is broadly accepted and implemented in Dutch education and training. The Dutch referencing report to the EQF (van der Sanden et al., 2012) details a strong tradition of ‘objectives-led’ governance of education and training, an approach which has proved conducive to a competence-based approach. Vocational education and training (VET) is probably most advanced in competence orientation; following extensive reform, a new VET competence-based structure has been developed and implemented. The same tendencies can be observed in general and higher education, although less systematically. The introduction of the qualifications framework for higher education has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes, as has the involvement of single institutions in the so-called ‘tuning project’.

The strong position of the learning outcomes approach is reflected in widespread use of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands. The NLQF is expected to strengthen the role of validation and turn it into an integrated part of the qualifications system.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science coordinates the development and implementation of the NLQF. The day-to-day running of the framework has been delegated to a NLQF secretariat which also operates as EQF national coordination point. In 2015 and 2016 the secretariat employed 2.7 full-time employees.

Unlike many other countries, initial development of the framework included only limited stakeholders input alongside the three ministries directly involved. An expert committee (the *Leintsje-committee*), consisting of four professors recruited for their expertise in education and training matters, produced a first outline of the framework. While consultation was eventually carried out, the original NLQF proposal was not the result of wide stakeholder involvement and engagement.

The priority given to the ‘opening up’ the NLQF to the private sector has partly responded to this initial weakness. Systematic work has been carried out

since 2012 informing potential stakeholders of the potential inherent in the framework. While progress has been slow, 31 qualifications have been levelled and included in the framework since start of work in 2012.

The NLQF builds on the qualifications framework for higher education developed (from 2005) in the context of the Bologna process. This culminated in the NQF for higher education in the Netherlands, which was verified by an independent external committee of peers in February 2009. The accreditation organisation for the Netherlands and the Flemish community of Belgium guarantees implementation through the accreditation process, which is obligatory across formally recognised higher education.

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

A new Dutch national policy on validation of non-formal and informal learning was presented in early 2014. The policy aimed to broaden validation opportunities for Dutch citizens. The outcome of this reorientation is closely linked to making validation of prior learning (VPL) ⁽³⁾ a successful tool in both learning and employment. Another objective is to share ownership of the validation method and its instruments, such as the use of portfolio, assessment and validation tools. These two validation paths are described as follows.

In the labour market route, VPL is aimed at career guidance for adults on the labour market. Prior individual learning outcomes are validated against sector/industry standards or formal qualifications. A learning programme – not necessarily a qualification-oriented programme – is designed to support intra- or inter-sector employability. VPL tools include the e-portfolio, portfolio-training, the *ervaringsprofiel*, and competence tests. If a formal VPL procedure is followed, the result can also be an *ervaringscertificaat*.

In the education route, individual learning and competences are validated against a national qualification. The goal for the learner is to validate his or her competences to obtain a formal qualification. VPL tools include intake-assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, and ECVET methods. An *ervaringscertificaat* can be part of someone's learning outcomes but is no longer

⁽²⁾ This section draws mainly on European Commission et al., 2016.

⁽³⁾ In Dutch: Erkenning van Verworven Competenties (EVC).

essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. This dual pathway means there is no longer an exclusive role for the *ervaringscertificaat* and awarding bodies for qualifications (in general exam committees of VET schools or universities) can also use the other mentioned VPL instruments.

NQF implementation

The NLQF is a fully operational NQF. While the NLQF secretariat operates with a limited staff and budget (approximately EUR 500 000 in 2015), the visibility of the NLQF is slowly increasing, also among stakeholders outside formal education and training.

The criteria and procedures detailed in Box 1 illustrate the main principles now developed for the inclusion of 'other qualifications' into the NLQF.

The opening up of the NLQF: criteria and procedures

The NLQF – represented by the national coordination point – has since 2012 promoted the possibility to have a qualification included in, and levelled to, the framework. This is being presented as an opportunity for providers to achieve better overall visibility, to strengthen comparability with other qualifications at national and European levels, to be able to apply the learning outcomes approach, and to strengthen links to the labour market.

If a provider such as a private company wants to submit a qualification for inclusion, it must undergo accreditation (or in Dutch 'validation'). Issues such as legal status, property rights, the continuity of the organisation and the existence of quality assurance arrangements are checked. A list of approved quality assurance systems is included in the guidance material: if the provider does not use such systems, an on-site visit is organised.

When an organisation has been accredited (for five years) it can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling. The organisation will indicate the level it sees as most appropriate, providing the starting point for the assessment on which a final decision will be made. When asking for inclusion, the organisation must indicate the learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the NLQF level descriptors (see Table 1), the workload (no qualifications of fewer than 400 hours nominal workload will be considered), the assessment approaches to be applied, and the link to relevant occupational profile.

While the national coordination point is responsible for organising the process, committees of independent, external experts assess the applications and give their advice to the NCP board, which eventually makes the final decision on inclusion. The board includes all the major stakeholders involved in the NLQF, including ministries and social partners.

Organisations must pay to use the system. Accreditation is between EUR 1 000 and EUR 7 500, depending on whether an approved quality assurance system is in place. Submitting one qualification for inclusion is set at EUR 2 500.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education initiated revision of existing legal texts underpinning Dutch education and training to make sure that the role of the NLQF is reflected. This revision, while currently delayed, will also address the inclusion of NLQF and EQF levels in certificates and qualifications. It is currently not clear when this revision will be finalised. While this process will not prevent the NQF from carrying out its current work, it will ultimately strengthen the legal position of the framework.

Referencing to the EQF

The Netherlands referenced its NQF to the EQF in October 2011 (van der Sanden et al., 2012).

The process drew attention to the proposal of referencing the academically oriented secondary education (pre-university secondary education (*vvoorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs*) (VWO)) to level 5 of the EQF. Following feedback from the EQF advisory group, the Netherlands accepted that this particular qualification should be referenced to level 4 of the EQF, but introduced a differentiation within the NQF, designating the VWO qualification as 4+ (in reality introducing a sublevel).

Important lessons and future plans

The Dutch NQF has now reached operational stage, notably by opening up to 'other qualifications' in the private sector. Future success will largely depend on whether the framework will be seen as relevant to stakeholders outside the limited circle of formal, public education and training. Stakeholders close to the process see the need to develop a comprehensive communication strategy in the coming period to ensure that as many as possible are involved in the further development and implementation of the framework. The responsible ministry must ensure that the role of the NLQF is clearly defined in planned revision of the existing legal basis.

Further sources of information:

The referencing document of the Dutch national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework (van der Sanden et al., 2012):

https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-efq/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf

The NLQF secretariat, national coordination point for EQF: <http://www.ncpnlqf.nl> [accessed 14.12.16].

Dutch national qualifications framework (NLQF)

NLQF levels	Formal qualifications	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
8	Doctorate/medical specialist (<i>Doctoraat/Medisch specialist</i>) <i>Ontwerper</i>		8
7	Master		7
6	Bachelor	Psychosocial counsellor (OPC) •Stressmanagement •Coaching counselling • <i>Conflictbemiddeling</i> Professional • <i>Operatie-assistent</i> • <i>Dialyseverpleegkundige</i> • <i>Relatiemanager Bedrijven</i> ABN AMRO •Certified leader excellent level • <i>Middelbare Defensie Vorming</i> • <i>Officier Korps Zeedienst</i> • <i>Officier Koninklijke Marechaussee onderbouw</i>	6
5	Higher professional education (<i>Hoger beroepsonderwijs</i>) (HBO)/ associate degree	•Consultant payroll Services & benefits (CPB) •Trainer-coach 5 • <i>Opleider 5</i> •Hotel service management • <i>Operationeel Technicus</i> <i>Energie Productietechniek</i>	5
4+	VWO (<i>voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i>) Vavo-vwo		4

NLQF levels	Formal qualifications	Other qualifications (*)	EQF levels
4	MBO-4 General secondary education for adults (<i>Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs</i>) (Vavo) Higher general secondary education (<i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i>) (Havo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •International flight attendant •Airport service agent •Senior medewerker (marechaussee) •Interior designer - EHCB •Trainer-coach 4 •Branchediploma Medisch Pedicure •Branchediploma Allround Schoonheidsspecialist •Applicatie opleiding Levensmiddelen technologie 	4
3	MBO-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hondentolletteren Algemeen Opsporingsambtenaar Zwemonderwijzer Trainer-coach 3 Branchediploma Pedicure Branchediploma Schoonheidsspecialist 	3
2	MBO-2 Vmbo kb/bl/bb (**) Vavo - Vmbo tl Pre-vocational secondary education, theoretical pathway (<i>Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs, theoretische leerweg</i>) Basic education 3 (<i>Basiseducatie 3</i>)	<i>Marechausseebeveiliger</i>	2
1	MBO-1 Vmbo bb Basic education 2 (<i>Basiseducatie 2</i>)		1
Entry level	Basic education 1 (<i>Basiseducatie 1</i>)		Entry level

(*) These are single qualifications included in the NLQF as of December 2016. They have been awarded by organisations outside the public, formal education and training system but, following quality control, attributed levels in the framework. The 'size' of these qualifications varies, but a minimum of 400 hours of nominal study time is required for a qualification to be considered for inclusion.

(**) Kb-advanced VET pathway, gl-combined VET and theoretical pathway, bb-basic VET pathway.

Source: Adapted from Dutch referencing report 2012 additional information from <http://www.nlqf.nl/nlqf-niveaus> and <http://www.nlqf.nl/register>

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
EVC	<i>Erkenning van Verworven Competenties</i> [validation of prior learning]
Havo	<i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i> [higher general secondary education]
HBO	<i>Hoger beroepsonderwijs</i> [higher professional education]
MBO	<i>middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> [upper secondary vocational education]
NLQF	qualifications framework for the Netherlands
NQF	national qualifications framework
Vavo	<i>Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs</i> [general secondary education for adults]
Vmbo	<i>Voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> [lower secondary general and pre-vocational education]
VET	vocational education and training
VWO	<i>Voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i> [pre-university secondary education]

References

[URLs accessed 17.10.2014]

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: the Netherlands*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

van der Sanden, K.; Smit, W.; Dashorst, M. (2012). *The referencing document of the Dutch national qualification framework to the European qualification framework*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Referencing_Netherlands_022012.pdf