

NQF state of play

 **Belgium-FR 2018**

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Introduction and context

The French Community of Belgium has been working on a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*Cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie* (CFC)) since 2006. Three distinct political authorities ([1]) are involved in the work:

- a. the French Community (the inhabitants of the French-speaking area of the Walloon Region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels); Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWG);
- b. the Walloon Region;
- c. the COCOF (*Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*).

The current framework dates back to 2010 when the three governments of the French Community agreed on the principle of creating a qualifications framework with double entry, one for educational qualifications and one for professional qualifications, placed into eight levels and consistent with the descriptors of the European qualifications framework. The proposed framework structure is close to that applied by the Flemish Community of Belgium. All major stakeholders agreed in mid-2011 on these main principles of the framework. The CFC was formally adopted in 2015, through a decree operationalising the agreement between the three francophone governments ([2]). The follow-up to the decree, particularly the inclusion of qualifications into the framework, has been slower than originally anticipated and the CFC has not yet reached full operational status.

The framework was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in December 2013. Self-certification to the QF-EHEA is work in progress.

Policy objectives

The development of the CFC has been seen as an integral part of the evolution of the existing education and training system, for the purposes of improving overall transparency and collaboration, aiding mobility and supporting individual learning pathways for citizens. The 2015 decree on the CFC refers to the following key objectives:

- a. facilitate learning continuity and progression;
- b. build bridges between different parts of the education and training system;
- c. strengthen relationship between initial and continuing education and training;
- d. support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- e. increase transparency and facilitate comparison across regional and national borders.

New objectives of the framework are (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles; Wallonie; COCOF, 2018):

- a. facilitate the employment of citizens and recruitment for employers;
- b. promote equal opportunities for citizens;
- c. facilitate assessment of competences.

While the CFC is seen as an instrument for strengthening the use of learning outcomes and for referencing to the EQF, the framework will not have a regulatory role and it is not seen as an instrument for reform of existing institutions and structures. According to the activity report of the CFC conducted by the EQF NCP (May 2016 to June 2018) ([3]), the framework is a tool that can play an important role in citizens' education, training and career pathways. It is also not seen as a control device for the validation of qualifications but rather a support instrument aiming at the continuous improvement of qualifications (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2018).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The referencing report (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2013) shows that the CFC is based on learning outcomes and that this approach has given rise to arrangements for validation and credit transfer. An eight-level structure has been adopted, using two blocks of terms: knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility ([4]). The descriptors developed by the Flemish qualifications framework have been used as a basis but adjusted according to the conditions of the community.

A competence-based approach is well established in compulsory education and training. Learning outcomes are described in terms of *socles de compétences* and *compétences terminales*. For adult education (including higher education short cycles, bachelor and master degrees) the term used is *capacités terminales*. A team has been appointed within the Ministry of Education to coordinate the 'cross-diagnostics of schools, training centres and validation of skills providers' ([5]). Among the items under revision is the evaluation of the learning outcomes, the material resources, the monitoring of quality in the assessment of learning outcomes and of the staff who carry out this process (Cedefop, forthcoming).

In vocational education and training, work is continuing to define and describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, to meet the need for shared reference systems for VET. Since 2010, regional providers of continuous vocational education and training (CVET) have developed a common certification procedure (*reconnaissance des acquis de formation* (RECAF)) based on common qualifications and assessment standards, with a competence-based approach. The French service for trades and qualifications (*Service francophone des métiers et qualifications* (SFMQ)) is playing an important role for learning outcomes, both for initial vocational education and training (IVET) and for CVET. The descriptions of qualifications are based on the occupational profiles (occupational standards) defined by the social partners. Common training profiles, in line with the reality of trades to ensure the labour market relevance of training, are then defined by providers. It is expected that use of these profiles by all training providers (IVET and CVET) will support learner mobility by ensuring that prior learning is taken into account; it will also increase education and training system transparency and improve

validation opportunities (Cedefop, forthcoming). These profiles are described in units of learning outcomes compatible with the European credit system for VET (ECVET) specifications. Progress has also been made in the pilot implementation of certification by units (*certification par unités*, CPU) in formal IVET programmes. As of September 2017, CPU was put in place for three optional subjects in post-secondary education ([6]). The aim is to organise the three years of vocational education and training in the form of learning outcomes units. A 2018 circular ([7]) foresees expansion to additional subjects as of September 2018. Schools that intend to introduce the CPU in other subjects can request authorisation from the cabinet of the Minister for Education. The experimentation and developments are carried out in the framework of the *Pact for excellence in education* ([8]) which is a 2015 action plan that has paved the way for improving accessibility of all to VET and qualifications (Cedefop, forthcoming).

Although higher education institutions are autonomous in designing their curriculum, they are required to align their school programme in accordance with the *competences communes* developed by ARES (Académie de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur). A guide has been produced to help higher education institutions define their learning outcomes to fit into common competence reference systems. There is little information on the extent of use of learning outcomes, apart from in the university colleges. Here, the new competences reference systems are gradually being implemented (Cedefop, 2016).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of the French Community regulates formal education in collaboration with school boards. The Walloon and Brussels Regions are in charge of vocational training and employment, and four regional public training services regulate vocational training provisions. This sharing of competences requires close and regular intergovernmental cooperation, with formal and non-formal agreements, to ensure the consistency of the system.

The three executive bodies of French-speaking Belgium (the French Community, the Walloon Region and COCOF) initiated the CFC development and established an expert group to do the preparatory work. This group includes representatives from all levels of education and regional bodies for vocational training. After 2010, a new steering group was set up, including stakeholders from general education (at all levels and of all types, including universities) and vocational/professional education and training (including social partners). With the adoption of the 2015 decree, operationalising the agreement between the three francophone governments ([9]), responsibilities and implementation processes for the framework have been established. The decree establishes the CFC Forum (*Instance CFC*) as a steering and coordinating authority, composed of various bodies (Decree of 15 May 2015):

- a. the Executive Committee manages day-to-day requests for allocation of qualifications to levels, the evaluation of the CFC and the updating of the qualifications register;
- b. the Management Committee assigns a level to the qualifications submitted by education and training operators. The organisation of the Management Committee is governed by internal regulations;
- c. the Committee of Experts provides its opinion on current and future decisions by the Management Committee, along with useful information on the functioning of the system and evaluation of its implementation;
- d. the Board of Appeal deals with appeals on the allocation of levels to qualifications ([10]).

During its first two years of its operation, the Executive Committee has created a common working culture and an environment of trust around its main task of managing positioning requests. As the only public service

body in French-speaking Belgium that involves representatives of all public VET operators, the Management Committee also contributes to the establishment of dialogue with the parties involved. The Committee of Experts met for the first time in March 2018. Its membership was extended to the Skills validation consortium (*Consortium de validation des compétences*) ([11]), the social partners, and the services of the Inspectorate of Education ([12]). This reflects the importance attached to consulting all CFC stakeholders (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2018).

The division of the framework into two main strands – educational and professional qualifications – has implications for stakeholder involvement. The *Service francophone des métiers et qualifications* (SFMQ) plays a key role in defining and positioning professional qualifications at levels 1 to 4. The SFMQ is well placed to play this role as its overall task is to develop occupational profiles based on the inputs from the social partners and in collaboration with employment services. Its role is also to develop training profiles for these occupational profiles, in liaison with education and training providers. The Academy of Research and Higher education (ARES) will be responsible for defining and positioning educational higher education qualifications at levels 6 to 8. This procedure is still in process. ARES and SFMQ will share responsibility for qualifications at level 5, reflecting the extensive 'mix' of professional and educational qualifications at this level.

The quality assurance system in French-speaking Belgium involves an external and formative assessment approach for higher education programmes, implemented by the Agency for quality assessment in higher education (AEQES) ([13]). In addition, a legal assessment and inspection procedure is implemented by the General Inspectorate for basic, secondary, special and social promotion education in particular. This approach is also used by the IFAPME/SFPME through the Training Directorate whose role is to inspect training centres. Since there are different quality assurance systems, it is necessary to develop a common internal structure to bridge those systems and promote convergence/harmonisation of the quality assurance systems (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2013).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[14]

In French-speaking Belgium, the system for validating non-formal and informal learning has undergone important developments since the early 2000s. It is the result of initiatives supported nationally and is framed by important pieces of legislation. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) was first developed in adult education (*Enseignement de promotion sociale* (EPS)) in 1991, followed in 2003 by the continuous vocational education and training (CVET) sector, with a focus on individuals with no formal qualifications. Recent policy strategies ([15]) confirm that validating non-formal and informal learning is now a key element of employment and education policies.

Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is embedded in the NQF decree, which makes facilitation of VNFIL as part of the NQF's objectives. It defines 'certification' as the formal result of an evaluation and validation carried out by a competent authority, establishing that an individual possesses the learning outcomes corresponding to determined standards, either at the end of an education or training pathway or following validation of his/her competences.

There are now two types of VNFIL in Belgium: the validation of competences (*validation des compétences* (VDC)) in the CVET sector, leading to the award of a recognised skills certificate (*titre de compétence*) following an assessment procedure; and the 'valorisation' of prior experience (*valorisation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE)) in adult education and higher education, leading to the validation of learning units or exemptions from certain parts of a study pathway. It is important to make the distinction between the concepts of 'valorisation' - to enhance and get credit for prior experience with a view to obtaining access to formal education and training - and 'validation', which gives access to a recognised title or qualification. Although the standards used for validation for the latter are the same as in the formal system, skills certificates awarded through validation are not equivalent to formal VET qualifications. They can be used to access further training courses and can be combined to obtain a qualification in the adult education sector which may be included in the NQF. The most significant developments recently have been in adult education, where a new decree ([16]),

adopted in 2017 and published in January 2018, promotes a unified approach to admission, exemption and certification of formal, non-formal and informal prior learning. It also seeks coordination between EPS providers, further development of validation procedures, transparency, clear routes and further transferability of certificates, as well as close cooperation with the CVET sector. In higher education, with a new regulatory framework in place since 2014 (Decree on the organisation of higher education), VAE has a stronger institutional basis and is used to grant admission to education pathways (all cycles of higher education) or exemptions. At secondary level (vocational or non-vocational), VAE is used to grant admission into education pathways or exemptions, but it can also lead to the issuing of a certificate of achievement (*attestation de réussite*) when the student passes the integrated final test (*épreuve intégrée*). Challenges still need to be addressed, particularly in terms of widening the profile of VAE users and reaching out to disadvantaged communities such as migrants and refugees. While awareness of the value of validation procedures for the labour market has been increasing, additional investment and strategies in visibility efforts are to be put in place. However, the scheme today is generally considered effective and robust.

NQF implementation and impact

The CFC reflects the federal structure of the country and coexists with the qualifications frameworks of the Flemish and German-speaking Communities. Introducing the distinction between educational and professional qualifications was instrumental in bringing the NQF process forward. This distinction made it possible to open up for professional qualifications at higher levels without questioning the autonomy of universities and their responsibility in relation to bachelor, master and doctorate awards. Using one set of level descriptors for all levels and both types of qualification has been accepted by the different stakeholders and will, in the longer term, make it possible to look more carefully into how these two strands can interact with each other.

While the legal adoption of the CFC in 2015 was important, delays in appointing an executive staff has slowed down overall progress, particularly for inclusion of qualifications in the framework. This means that the CFC has not yet reached full operational status. However, in 2016 the CFC Forum was established and the first inclusions of qualifications started in 2017.

A national database of qualifications has been set up ([17]). To date, 50 qualifications have been included in the register individually at levels, 2, 3, 4 and 5. These are vocational and secondary general education qualifications and qualifications awarded through validation (see above). It is possible to position qualifications for a period of two years under a transitional procedure, after which a new application will have to be submitted for final allocation of level. The need for this progressive approach comes from the differences between the systems of the competent authorities, which imply agreements for criteria shared by all providers. The positioning phase has started (with the inclusion of 50 qualifications), aiming to reach a critical mass of qualifications (general secondary education, higher education and almost all VET qualifications) needed for the different parties to use the framework (Cedefop, forthcoming).

One of the main objectives of the CFC Forum is to indicate the NQF/EQF level on all qualifications, so it has asked all the public services and ministries to include the levels on qualifications documents. Adult education providers responded positively, while general education and higher education responded negatively. VET operators have not responded but are moving towards an indication of the level to all

qualifications documents (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). CFC/EQF levels are also displayed on Europass certificate and diploma supplements ([18]).

The main challenges in implementing the CFC have been to include a large number of qualifications in the framework to enhance comparability and disseminate the benefits of the framework to citizens and beneficiary institutions (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). However, the competent authorities have no obligation to file an application for positioning qualifications. Another reason for the lack of inclusion of more qualifications is that such qualifications might not fully meet the prerequisites for inclusion. In order to address this issue, the EQF NCP has held three meetings presenting recommendations on the systems of the competent authorities and procedures of external quality agencies or mechanisms (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2018).

The EQF NCP is planning to disseminate information about the framework using its website, video clips, brochures and guidance documents. The target groups that will be prioritised will be employers, guidance counsellors of education and training providers, employment counsellors of public employment services, teachers, trainers, trade union representatives and human resources managers; these will be able to disseminate the benefits of the framework to the end-users.

The communication plan second stage will have more specific objectives such as targeting the general public, as the framework is currently less known among labour market actors at regional and local level. To date there has been no evaluation study on the different aspects of the framework and its impact (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

The CFC levels were referenced to the EQF levels in 2013 (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Wallonie COCOF, 2013). An updated referencing report is foreseen for 2020.

Important lessons and future plans

While formal adoption is important, moving towards operational status requires that practical follow up and implementation takes place as required.

The development of the CFC also demonstrates the importance of finding a workable link between higher education and the other forms of education and training. Distinguishing between educational and professional qualifications at all levels has been instrumental in making progress. Whether this structure can be used to open up for future developments of professional qualifications at higher levels and for establishing stronger links between educational and professional sectors remains to be seen.

One of the key challenges is the need to have a high percentage of qualifications from all types of providers included and levelled so that the CFC can guarantee their comparability in French-speaking Belgium.

Main sources of information

- CFC Forum (Instance CFC) acts as EQF NCP:
<http://www.cfc.cfwb.be/>
- CFC website : <http://www.cfc.cfwb.be/>
- *Registre des certifications*.
<http://www.cfc.cfwb.be/cfc/certifications/>
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles; Wallonie COCOF (2013). *Report on referencing the French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning*. <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	(not available)	8
7	(not available)	7
6	(not available)	6
5	Skills certificate for adult education (Certificat de compétences acquises en formation de formateur(trice) professionnel(le) d'adultes) Professional degree (for business manager) (Diplôme de chef d'entreprise agent(e) commercial(e)) Professional degree (for police inspectors) (Diplôme de formation de base d'aspirant(e) inspecteur(trice) de police) (not available) Category Educational qualification types	5
4	Upper secondary technical education certificate (*) (Certificat de qualification de technicien) (*) For example: Certificat de qualification de technicien.ne chimiste; Certificat de qualification de technicien(ne) en décoration et aménagement d'espaces. Certificate of apprenticeship offered by regional providers (**) (Certificat d'apprentissage) (**) For example: Certificat d'apprentissage d'infographiste; Certificat d'apprentissage d'opticien(ne) lunetier(ière). Skills certificate (***) (Certificat de compétences) (***) For example: Certificat de compétences acquises en formation d'agent(e) en comptabilité; Certificat de compétences acquises en formation d'aide-comptable.	4

3	Upper secondary vocational or artistic education leaving certificate (****) (Certificat de compétences acquises en formation) (****) For example: Certificat de compétences acquises en formation de coffreur(euse) ferrailleur(euse).	3
2	Lower secondary education - Technical performance assistant (Auxiliaire technique de spectacle)	2
1	(not available)	1

Acronyms

AEQES	<i>Agence pour l'évaluation de la qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur</i> [Agency for quality assessment in higher education]
ARES	<i>Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur</i> [Academy of Research and Higher Education]
CFC	<i>Cadre francophone des certifications pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie</i> [French-speaking qualifications framework for lifelong learning]
COCOF	<i>Commission communautaire française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale</i> [French Community commission in the Brussels-capital Region]
CPU	<i>certification par unités (certification per units)</i>
CVET	continuous vocational education and training
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EEA	European economic area
EPS	<i>Enseignement de promotion sociale</i> [Education for Social Promotion]
JEQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European qualifications framework
FOREM	<i>Office Régional wallon pour l'emploi et la formation professionnelle</i> [Walloon Regional office for employment and vocational training]
FWG	Walloon- Brussels Federation [Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles]
IFAPME	<i>Institut de formation en alternance des petites et moyennes entreprises</i> [SME work/study training institute]

IFPME	<i>Institut de Formation Permanente pour les Classes moyennes et les petites et moyennes entreprises</i> [training institute for SMEs, for the French Community] (Community institution preceding the IFAPME and the SFPME)
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QDG	<i>Qualifikationsrahmen Deutschsprachiger Gemeinschaft</i> [qualifications framework German-speaking Community]
RECAF	<i>Reconnaissance des acquis de formation</i> [recognition of prior learning]
SFPME	Service Formation des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises [Training service for SMEs]
SFMQ	<i>Service francophone des métiers et qualifications</i> [French service for trades and qualifications]
VAE	<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> [valorisation of prior experience]
VDC	<i>validation des compétences [valorisation of competences)</i>
VET	vocational education and training

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Related content

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