

NQF state of play



Czechia 2018

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Introduction and context

The Czech Republic is positioned relatively well with regard to some European education and training indicators, with a low rate of early school leaving (6.6% in 2016, compared to 10.7% the EU average) and a high employment rate for recent graduates. The country has the highest percentage of upper secondary students in vocational education and training (VET). While educational achievements in reading, maths and science are comparable to EU averages, the percentages of Czech underachievers have increased significantly over recent years, particularly in science and reading, and socioeconomic background is a strong factor in differences in student performance. Tertiary educational attainment has increased but remains below EU average, and participation in early childhood education and care is not yet as widespread as in other EU countries (European Commission, 2017).

Over the last decade there have been major developments in almost all parts of the education system: decentralisation of governance and curriculum reform in the schools system, introduction of the three-cycle system in higher education, and development of the national qualifications system in further education. However, 'awareness of interconnectedness between various parts of the education system has gradually decreased' (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014, p. 5). Development of the education system in the direction of lifelong learning has become a priority; it is acknowledged that, for this to become a reality, there is a need to establish links between different education pathways. As the Czech Republic has not yet developed a comprehensive national qualification framework (NQF), the question is whether an overarching NQF could help coordinate and bridge developments in the different sub-systems.

The national register of qualifications (*Národní soustava kvalifikací* - NSK), which functions as a qualifications framework for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) and continuing VET (CVET) qualifications, and a draft of the higher education framework ([1]) have been developed. There are also draft level descriptors for primary and secondary education. Promotion and development of a comprehensive NQF is in line with the national *Strategy for education policy until 2020*, however, the possibility of developing a comprehensive NQF is not mentioned explicitly and it is unlikely that one will be established before 2020 (European Commission et. al. (forthcoming), p. 9).

The country referenced its national qualifications system to the EQF in 2011 (NÚOV, 2011). All qualifications awarded in secondary education, higher education, and the qualifications included in the NSK are linked to the EQF levels. The three sub-systems are regulated by three different acts ([2]).

Policy objectives

Interlinked development of a framework and a register of vocational qualifications was a cornerstone of the (now expired) national *Strategy for lifelong learning* (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2007). The strategy's main elements reflected identified and agreed needs, and aimed at improving access to lifelong learning ([3]) and a more permeable education and training system. In 2015, the *Strategy for lifelong learning* expired. The main strategic documents currently in force in the country are the *Strategy for education policy until 2020*, the *Long-term policy objectives of education and development of the education system* (2015-20), and the *Long-term objectives in higher education* (2016-20). The *Strategy for education policy until 2020* includes priorities to reduce inequalities, to increase the quality of teaching, to improve partnerships between schools and employers and to improve governance of the education system (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014). The *Long-term objectives in higher education* (2016-20) ([4]) refer to the introduction of the NQF for higher education and its self-certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA).

Developments in VET and higher education – to some extent pursued through projects – have not been coordinated or connected. At the same time, the idea of a comprehensive framework is neither well nor widely understood. Despite the efforts of the EQF national coordination point (EQF NCP), most stakeholders and decision makers are not convinced about the need for a national framework or its benefits (European Commission et. al, forthcoming). This leaves several unanswered questions and challenges for developing shared concepts, improving communication and cooperation between sub-systems, and opening up access pathways to education programmes.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The national register of qualifications (NSK) ([5]), which addresses adults as a main target group and learning outcomes acquired outside formal education and training, has eight levels and is currently populated with qualifications between EQF levels 2 to 7. Qualification levels in the NSK are described in terms of competences. The level descriptors of the NSK, although not divided into knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy, were developed in close connection with the eight levels of the EQF and are compatible with the EQF descriptors (NÚV, 2015). They reflect the complexity of work activities. Each qualification included in the NSK is described by a qualification standard (a list of expected learning outcomes) and an assessment standard (set of evaluation criteria). They are drafted by employers and are based on the descriptions of occupations in the national system of occupations ([6]).

The draft NQF for higher education covers three levels, corresponding to levels 6 to 8 of the EQF. It includes academic qualifications (bachelor, master and doctoral degrees), but excludes tertiary vocational education (DiS) degrees. The architecture of the framework has two layers: the general (national) descriptors and the education (subject area) descriptors. Descriptors are divided into professional knowledge, professional skills and general competences. This division is compatible with the overarching framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) and also with the EQF descriptors. There is currently no link between the NSK and the draft qualifications framework for higher education: apart from the possibility to achieve vocational qualifications through validation, existing arrangements do not offer opportunities to access programmes through different pathways. The *maturita* exam (upper-secondary leaving examination) is a compulsory requirement to enter higher education, although higher education institutions can also decide to use specific entry examinations.

A set of level descriptors for primary and secondary education (EQF levels 1 to 4) was also drafted in 2012, based on core curricula. In this proposal, descriptors were grouped into three categories: knowledge, specific study and work skills, and transferable skills.

In 2013, a group of experts from education and the labour market drafted a proposal for national comprehensive descriptors, reflecting both the

EQF descriptors and the existing national sectoral descriptors. This proposal was updated in 2016.

The learning outcomes ([7]) approach is widely used, although applied and interpreted slightly differently across education levels and subsystems. The Education Act ([8]), which came into force in 2005, introduced learning outcomes in national core curricula for all levels below tertiary. The use of learning outcomes as a starting point at all levels of the education system is also one of the aims of the *Strategy for education policy until 2020* (Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014).

Core curricula for primary and secondary education make the distinction between knowledge and skills and emphasise key competences (learning, problem solving, communication, social and interpersonal interaction, civic involvement and work skills) and their practical use. Expected learning outcomes are defined in terms of activities, practice-oriented, usable in everyday life and verifiable (tasks that students should be able to perform). Modularisation of courses was introduced to improve transferability between various pathways in initial and continuous education, but schools have the autonomy to choose whether or not to use modular organisation of curricula. Apart from a pilot project focused on modularisation, this is not common in practice.

A competence-based and learning outcomes-oriented approach is also found in VET and higher education and has broad political support. This is documented and confirmed by curriculum reform in vocational education (including relevant methodologies) and by the Act on the verification and recognition of results of further education. Initial VET (IVET) core curricula are increasingly being aligned with competences defined in the NSK; the holistic character of the term 'competence' is emphasised. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are not seen as 'atomised' entities which can be judged in isolation from each other (Cedefop, 2016). Higher education distinguishes between professional knowledge, professional skills and general competences. Knowledge and skills are tied to particular subjects, while competences are of more general character: they include judgment, communicative ability (including in foreign languages) and preparation for continuing learning. The use of professional knowledge and skills in a particular context, with a particular degree of autonomy and responsibility, is described as competence (NÚV, 2015).

The learning outcomes approach was used and explored in developing the national qualifications framework for higher education. Each study programme has a 'graduate profile' (general programme description) and

programme goals, which are described in terms of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as knowledge, skills and competences that graduates should be able to demonstrate on completion of a specific learning phase. The National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education recommends that higher education institutions structure learning outcomes in this way, and it is intended that, after testing and implementation, the framework will be used in the accreditation process (Cedefop, 2016).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The EQF national coordination point (EQF NCP) has been operational since 2009, first within the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (NÚOV) and since 2011 within the National Institute for Education (NÚV) ([9]). The NCP played an important role in referencing the Czech qualifications system to the EQF, a process for which the Ministry of Education had overall responsibility. NÚV leads discussions on establishing a comprehensive NQF and provides and disseminates information on European tools.

The 2006 Act on the verification and recognition of further education results, which came into force in 2007 ([10]), sets out the basic responsibilities, powers and rights of all stakeholders in developing and awarding national vocational qualifications. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) coordinates the activities of central administrative authorities (ministries) and approves, modifies and issues a list of vocational and complete vocational qualifications. The National Council for Qualifications acts as an advisory body to the MEYS on qualifications. The national register of qualifications (NSK) is maintained and published by NÚV. Sector councils are in charge of developing qualification and assessment standards for qualifications up to level 7 included in the NSK, though most qualifications are placed at levels 2 to 5 ([11]). There are currently 29 sector councils consisting of representatives of employers, employees, qualification authorities and academic sectors.

One important change in the past 15 years has been a transfer of powers and responsibilities to the local level. Cooperation among central government, regional government, social partners (especially employers) and parents is important. The involvement of employers is strongest in VET, where they take part in the formulation of national curricula and in the work-based training of students. Schools are responsible for setting and achieving their own goals, based on the national curriculum. However, key quality assurance mechanisms remain under the control of the Ministry of Education and, for primary and secondary education and tertiary vocational schools, the Czech School Inspectorate, which acts as external evaluator. In tertiary education, the main quality assurance mechanism is approval of programmes, which is given by the Ministry of Education, based on reports from the National Accreditation Bureau for

Higher Education (university sector) and by the Accreditation Commission for Tertiary Vocational Education (tertiary vocational sector). Individual institutions at all levels of education and training are also required by law to have internal quality assurance systems in place (NÚV, 2015).

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

[12]

The Czech system of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is regulated by Act 179/2006 on the verification and recognition of further education results ([13]), amended in 2012 ([14]). Validation and recognition procedures are in place for qualifications included in the national register of qualifications (NSK) and are aimed at mitigating skill shortages on the labour market. The register addresses further learning results and vocational competences (CVET), with adults as a main target group. It currently contains 1 234 vocational qualifications in 29 different sectors, ranging between EQF/NQF levels 2 to 7, with most on levels 3 (646 qualifications) and 4 (382 qualifications) (data from April 2018).

The VNFIL system operates more or less parallel to formal education, with some connections between the two. The concept of 'vocational qualification' is the central principle of the VNFIL system. Qualifications are developed by sector councils, where representatives of employers, employees, qualification authorities, VET and the academic sector are involved in identifying current skills needs and shortages.

Validation and recognition procedures are based on assessment of knowledge, skills and competences gained by prior learning and work experience, and are carried out according to the qualifications and assessment standards included in the NSK. Each qualification standard – based on occupational standards – is defined in competences. The assessment is also competence-based, usually consisting of an oral examination, written part and practical demonstration of skills and competences. Over the past 10 years, more than 195 000 adult learners have passed exams and were awarded a certificate of vocational qualification (data from September 2018). Certain vocational qualifications can be combined and, after a comprehensive final exam, can lead to a full VET qualification at NSK/EQF level 3. This makes final exams a bridge between the formal and the VNFIL systems.

The main strengths of VNFIL in the Czech Republic are the existing legal basis, information accessibility, quality assurance arrangements, and close collaboration with employers in developing vocational qualifications. The national VNFIL policy, supported by the NSK, has also

been incorporated in the national active policy for employment (APE), the framework of measures stipulated by the Act 435/2004 on Employment, which links retraining offers to existing vocational qualifications. Accessibility of guidance and counselling services are aspects that could be improved; while disadvantaged groups have access to validation through public employment services, support services are typically subject to fees.

Education and training providers in general, vocational and higher education can decide to shorten a learner's pathway in line with legal provisions. This is normally at the school principal's discretion. However, there is no methodological framework for how this should be done and there is little data on how much it is used. Access to formal education programmes requires a formal qualification; for instance, to access higher education, students have to have achieved an upper-secondary leaving certificate (*maturita*). Certain combined vocational qualifications obtained via the VNFIL system can, however, enable the holder to sit the *maturita* exam, for access to higher education. Higher education institutions are also able to (but do not have to) select applicants based on their own entrance exams or results from national comparative exams. In the absence of a comprehensive NQF, coordination, communication and transfer among the different subsystems remain limited.

No credit system is used in VET in the Czech Republic. The European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) is used in higher education, though it is not linked to validation arrangements.

NQF implementation and impact

The Czech Republic does not have a comprehensive NQF in place. While debate on its possible development continues, it is unlikely that it will be established before 2020 (European Commission et al, forthcoming). Work on qualifications has been carried out at subsystem level to varying degrees, and the main issue remains the integration of these separate developments into a single overarching framework, with a single set of level descriptors. The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) functions as a framework for the VNFIL system, including qualifications awarded outside the formal system, awarded under the Act 179/2006 on the verification and recognition of further education results. A draft qualifications framework for higher education was also developed. In 2011, the country referenced its qualifications from secondary education, higher education, and the vocational qualifications included in the NSK directly to EQF levels.

The NSK is fully operational and has qualification and assessment standards structured on eight levels ([15]). So far, 1 234 vocational qualifications in 29 different sectors have been included in the register (data from April, 2018), all achievable through validation. Most of these vocational qualifications are at levels 2 to 5, but a few at levels 6 and 7 have also been published. Since the establishment of the NSK, over 195 000 vocational qualifications have been awarded (data from September, 2018).

The draft qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna framework, was designed and developed in the Q-RAM project (2009-12). The Q-RAM framework covered EQF levels 5 to 8, where level 5 was foreseen to be assigned to short-cycle programmes once this category was introduced during higher education reform. Currently there is no concept of short cycle. In 2012, the qualifications framework went through pilot implementation at 12 universities and four tertiary VET institutions (VOŠ). In 2015, the framework was revised and discussed with the representation of higher education institutions. Its scope has been reduced to EQF levels 6 to 8 and it includes only qualifications provided by universities (not VOŠ, tertiary VET schools). There were plans to introduce the qualifications framework for higher education into national legislation, in the decree on standards for accreditation in higher education, prepared in response to the amendment to the Higher Education Act ([16]) effective since September 2016. However, those

plans were not successful, hindering implementation and the self-certification process.

EQF levels have been indicated on the qualifications included in the NSK since 2011, and on general education qualifications, initial VET qualifications and qualifications awarded by tertiary vocational schools and conservatories since October 2017. Including EQF levels on higher education qualifications is voluntary and has been a challenge, due to the autonomy of higher education institutions. EQF levels have been indicated on Europass certificate supplements and diploma supplements since 2012 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The EQF NCP has been disseminating information about the EQF through the EQF national website ([17]), social media, and presentations in seminars, conferences, workshops, and education and job fairs. The main groups targeted have been policy and decision makers, experts in the different education sectors, teachers, career counsellors, learners and employers (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). It has also been leading discussions on the possibility of developing a comprehensive NQF.

Referencing to the EQF

The Czech Republic referenced its national qualifications subsystems directly to the EQF levels in December 2011. In the absence of a comprehensive NQF, formal initial qualifications from secondary education were referenced, based on the classification of educational qualifications types (KKOV) and nationally approved curricula. CVET qualifications awarded through VNFIL and included in the NSK were also referenced. Tertiary education qualifications were linked to the EQF based on characteristics of the different levels of tertiary education set out in national legislation (NÚV, 2015). The initial referencing report (NÚOV, 2011) was updated in 2013 and 2015 following minor changes in legislation. The latest referencing report (NÚV, 2015) is published on the EQF portal ([\[18\]](#)).

The draft framework for higher education has not yet been self-certified against the QF-EHEA as it has not yet been approved at national level.

Important lessons and future plans

Partial/sectoral qualifications frameworks based on the learning outcomes approach have been developed in the Czech Republic, specifically the national register of qualifications (NSK), which acts as a framework for the VNFIL system and is fully operational, and a draft qualifications framework for higher education, which is pending approval. Level descriptors were also developed for primary and secondary education, based on core curricula.

The main challenge and open topic of discussion in the country is development towards a comprehensive overarching NQF, with a coherent set of level descriptors. This could bring together lower and upper secondary education qualifications and the sub-frameworks for vocational qualifications and higher education. It could potentially increase connectedness and coherence between developments in the different parts of the education system and open up access pathways. Explicit levels and a single set of descriptors would make links to EQF levels more transparent. Discussions on the purpose and potential advantages of an NQF have started along with work by experts, but reaching political agreement among stakeholders is a challenge and no decision has yet been taken.

In 2015 a working group was established by the Ministry of Education to implement the EQF. The group brings together representatives from all sections of the Ministry, from the Czech School Inspectorate and from organisations directly controlled by the Ministry: the National Institute for Education and National Institute for Further Education. One of its tasks is to develop one comprehensive NQF as a tool to improve the orientation and coordination of the education system and provide clarity in Czech qualifications for domestic and foreign citizens ([19]).

Successful implementation of learning outcomes requires coordination of subsystems, initiatives, measures and bodies, which is sometimes difficult. Better understanding of the approach, better cooperation, communication and coordination are prerequisites for future implementation of learning outcomes across education and training. One line of progress over recent years has been the development of informal networks of experts, teachers, researchers, policy makers and officials willing to discuss and share their experiences. All interviewees contacted for a Cedefop study on learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016) expressed the need for better understanding of the learning outcomes concept among

different sectors and a desire for better coordination of education policies.

Main sources of information

- The National Institute for Education (NÚV) is the EQF NCP:
<http://www.nuv.cz/>
- National register of vocational qualifications (NSK):
<http://www.narodnikvalifikace.cz/en-us/>
- NÚV (2015). *National referencing report of the Czech Republic: 3rd revised edition*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/national_referencing_r...

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral programme PhD degrees three to four years beyond master (doktor) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training In the absence of a comprehensive NQF, the Czech Republic has referenced its qualifications sub-systems directly to the EQF.	8
7	Master programme Mgr, MgA., Ing., Ing. arch., MUDr, MDDr, MVDr, JUDr, PhDr, RNDr, Pharm.Dr, ThLic., and ThDr degrees one to three years of tertiary education beyond bachelor or four to six years of tertiary education (magistr, inženýr, doktor) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Qualifications awarded through VNFIL e.g. Senior detective (vedoucí detektiv) Chemical engineer product manager (inženýr chemie produktmanažer)	7

6	Bachelor programme Bc and BcA degrees three to four years of tertiary education (bakalář) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Tertiary vocational education DiS degree three to three-and-a-half years of tertiary education (diplomovaný specialista) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Qualifications awarded through VNFIL e.g. Career counsellor for educational and professional path (kariérový poradce pro vzdělávací a profesní dráhu) Independent research and development electrician (samostatný elektrotechnik výzkumný a vývojový pracovník)	6
5	Qualifications awarded through VNFIL e.g. Tour guide (průvodce cestovního ruchu) Agricultural advisor for plant production (zemědělský poradce pro ochranu rostlin)	5

4	Upper secondary education with maturita exam General education - four years of upper secondary study (Gymnazium) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Upper secondary education with maturita exam Vocational education - four years of upper secondary study Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Supplementary study leading to a maturita exam Two years of study after the VET certificate Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Qualifications awarded through VNFIL E.g. Quality management specialist in engineering (technik řízení jakosti ve strojírenství) Detective trainee (detektiv koncipient)	4
3	Upper secondary education with VET certificate Vocational education - three years of upper secondary study (detektiv koncipient) Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Qualifications awarded through VNFIL e.g. Glassmaker for pressed glass (sklář lisovaného skla) Locksmith (zámkař)	3

2	Lower secondary education Completion of a lower secondary general education programme - nine years Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training Qualifications awarded through VNFIL E.g. Production of side dishes (výroba příloh) Guard (strážný)	2
1	Special education Completion of an educational programme in a special school - 10 years Category Czech qualifications awarded in formal education and training	1

Acronyms

CVET	continuing vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
KKOV	classification of educational qualification types
NCP	national coordination point
NSK	national register of qualifications (<i>Národní soustava kvalifikací</i>)
NQF	national qualifications framework
NÚOV	National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education [<i>Národního ústavu odborného vzdělávání</i>]
NÚV	National Institute for Education [<i>Národního ústavu pro vzdělávání</i>]
QF- EHEA	qualifications framework of the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

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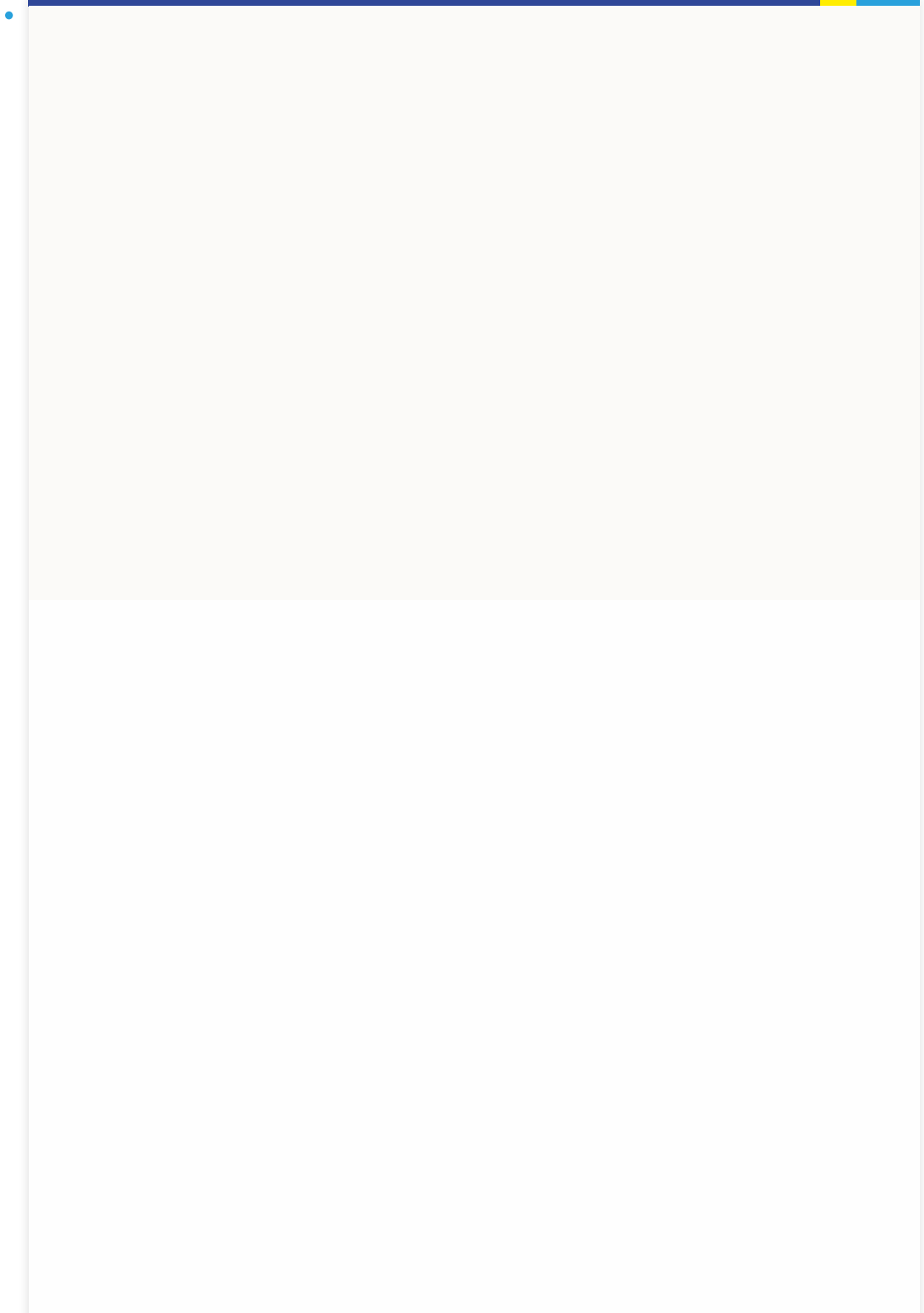
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Related content



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