

NQF state of play



Bulgaria 2022

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Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF:

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training.

Number of levels:

Eight plus a preparatory level, covering pre-school education

Legal basis/stage of development:

Decision No 96 of the CoM on the NQF (2012)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

In Bulgaria in 2021, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (4 %) was below the EU average (5 %). The country has a relatively low level of participation in early childhood education (80.1 % in 2021); its rate of early leaving from education and training remains above the EU average (12.2 % and 9.7 % respectively in 2021). In the same year, tertiary education attainment (age 25–34) (33.6 %) was also well below the level for the EU-27 (41.2 %) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). Participation in upper secondary VET amounted to 51.5 % in 2020, i.e. above the EU average (48.7 %) ([1]). Though the employment rate of VET graduates increased to 72.4 % in 2021, it remains below the EU average (76.4 %). The participation of adults in lifelong learning also remains among the lowest in the EU (1.8 %) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

In 2021, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers adopted the [strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria \(2021–2030\)](#). This aims at creating attractive and flexible opportunities for acquiring basic skills, new competences and qualifications in the formal education system and through non-formal and informal learning, and at promoting upskilling and lifelong learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

1.2. NQF legal basis

The BQF is now firmly embedded in national legislation. The referencing report was adopted by the education ministry in March 2014. Two amendment bills in the same year supported the implementation of the BQF; they introduced legal arrangements regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning, learning-outcome units and the introduction of the VET credit accumulation and transfer system ([2]). According to the [law on pre-school and school education](#), state educational standards are in line with the BQF ([3]).

Policy objectives

The overall objectives of the BQF are to promote the transparency of qualifications and raise trust in education and training, easing the transferability and recognition of qualifications. More specific aims include (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013):

- a. developing a translating device aiming to bridge education sectors;
- b. promoting mobility within education and in the labour market;
- c. promoting the learning-outcomes approach;
- d. supporting the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- e. fostering lifelong learning;
- f. increasing cooperation between stakeholders.

The main functions of the BQF are promoting the transparency, transferability and recognition of qualifications and fostering trust in education and training. The framework is also seen as an enabler of national reform, supporting the setting-up of a system for validating non-formal learning, strengthening education and training quality and providers' accountability, and modernising curricula (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Learning-outcome-based qualification levels are expected to give learning outcomes a more prominent role in designing education provision (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The BQF consists of eight levels and an additional preparatory level (BQF level 0, covering pre-school education). Level descriptors take EQF and QF-EHEA descriptors into account. Level descriptors defined in learning outcomes aim to provide a reference point and common language for diverse qualifications from different education subsystems. They are described in terms of knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills and competences. Skills can be cognitive (use of logical and creative thinking) or practical (manual dexterity; use of methods, materials, tools and instruments). Competence descriptors distinguish between personal and professional competences. Personal competences include autonomy and responsibility, and key elements such as learning competences, communicative and social competences are also emphasised (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013). Level descriptors expressed in learning outcomes reflect the legal acts governing various education sectors, along with state educational standards defining the content and expected learning outcomes of programmes.

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The BQF includes qualifications from all levels of formal education and training: pre-primary, primary and secondary general education, VET and higher education. Partial qualifications (certificates of vocational training) are levelled to the BQF (levels 2 to 5) according to the level of the full vocational qualification ([4]). Validation can lead to BQF full and partial qualifications ([5]); validation certificates indicate the BQF level ([6]). According to the [law on pre-school and school education, Article 141](#), all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents will be referenced to the relevant BQF level and linked to the corresponding EQF level. Through the ‘development of digital skills’ project, 565 unified competence profiles for digital skills were created and validated (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023) ([7]). These profiles are linked to the BQF ([8]).

Partial qualifications and validation certificates for partial qualifications in a profession are considered to be microcredentials. They comply with all the elements described in the Council recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials (Cedefop, 2023; Cedefop and ReferNet,

2023).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

The term 'learning outcomes' is widespread in policy documents. The [2014–2020 national lifelong learning strategy](#) defined the term 'learning outcome units' (*единици учебни резултати*) as 'a component of qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competences, which could be assessed and validated through a certain number of credit points linked to them'.

Learning outcomes are used or referred to in national curriculum, assessment and examination documents, particularly in state educational standards ([9]). The implementation of the learning-outcomes approach has continued since the adoption of the 2016 law on school and pre-school education. In 2018, new curricula were adopted for upper secondary education (grades 11 and 12) (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

In VET, a legal definition exists of the term 'learning outcomes'. State educational standards for acquiring vocational qualifications and examination requirements have been updated (or new ones developed) using the learning-outcomes approach. This update is a prerequisite for implementing the validation procedure and awarding credits. Since 2015, the principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training have been used to design standards for VET, aiming to link units of learning outcomes with credits. In 2019, methodological guidelines for the development of state educational standards were published on the website of the [National Agency for Vocational Education and Training \(Националната агенция за професионално образование и обучение – NAVET\)](#) ([10]). Since 2018, an extensive update of VET curricula has taken place (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

Learning outcomes are used or referred to in updating state educational standards and evaluation and accreditation procedures in higher education. However, there is no systematic approach to implementing learning outcomes in higher education. Institutions are autonomous, and are responsible for developing curriculum, assessment and examination rules; some use learning outcomes in their programmes, but implementation differs from one institution to another. For example, the New Bulgarian University uses [learning outcomes](#), while the Burgas Free University also uses learning outcomes in some of its [master's programmes](#) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

3.4. Quality assurance arrangements

The law on school and pre-school education introduced quality management processes, including for VET. Quality management is a continuous process of organisational development; the evaluation is performed through biennial self-assessment and inspection. In 2018, a decree of the Council of Ministers established the National Inspectorate of Education, which has the main function of organising expert analysis and quality assessment in kindergartens and schools. The inspectorate has developed a quality framework with a specific set of criteria and indicators; learning outcomes are an important element of the framework (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency is a governmental institution dealing with the independent evaluation of the quality of higher education and the accreditation of higher education institutions. The body responsible for quality assurance in adult education and training is the National Employment Agency. It assesses three main factors for providing training: curriculum, teaching staff and facilities.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The education ministry coordinated and led the drafting of the BQF and is now coordinating its implementation, while it has the overall responsibility for qualifications at all BQF levels. The ministry's International Cooperation Directorate is the EQF national coordination point.

The [National Agency for Vocational Education and Training \(NAVET\)](#) is responsible for qualifications at levels 2 to 5. It has been involved in developing and updating the list of VET qualifications, with each qualification being assigned to a certain BQF level ([11]). NAVET is responsible for coordinating VET institutions at the national level; developing/updating the list of VET professions and education standards for professional qualifications, describing the relevant knowledge, skills and competences in accordance with the BQF level descriptors. In this way NAVET promotes the framework among different stakeholders, mainly among pedagogical staff (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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

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

The validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) ([12]), and of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired from them, is an integral part of Bulgarian lifelong learning policy ([13]). The 2021–2030 strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning considers improving VNFIL mechanisms to be an important way to expand lifelong learning opportunities (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Validation arrangements currently exist in general, vocational and adult education, but not in higher education. Validation also eases access to the labour market. One of the aims of the BQF is to promote VNFIL.

Validation using state education standards can lead to vocational qualifications or to partial qualifications at BQF levels 2 to 5. Vocational knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal or informal learning are compared against the intended learning outcomes described in state educational standards. A 2015 [ordinance on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences](#) defines the validation stages, requirements for assessors, procedural requirements and types of validation certificate to be issued. It also puts in place an institutional framework with a clear allocation of responsibilities and coordination between public institutions and social partners, which is one of the strengths of the current system. While there are no explicit quality assurance indicators for validation, current legislation stipulates that institutions must put in place an internal quality assurance system. In 2021, a significant increase in the number of completed validation procedures was registered, with 725 validation certificates being issued (mainly full qualifications) (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Certificates acquired through validation differ, in title and description, from those issued in VET: the former describe validated competences ([14]) and the latter subjects of education. Validation certificates are recognised equally by the education authorities and the labour market, compared to the certificates issued through mainstream educational pathways ([15]) (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The BQF has reached the activation stage. Its implementation structures are in place, along with by-laws, criteria and procedures for the allocation of qualifications to levels and administrative regulations. The BQF is a reference point for the use of learning outcomes and for the continuous revision and renewal of qualifications, while it gradually plays a role in improving the transparency and comparability of qualifications and supporting the reform and renewal of education and training. More needs to be done regarding end users' awareness, setting up a comprehensive database and indicating BQF/EQF levels on qualifications from all education sectors.

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

Since 2018, BQF/EQF levels have been indicated on all VET certificates (full and partial qualifications at levels 2 to 5), on their Europass certificate supplements and in the register (Section 7.4). It is planned that BQF/EQF levels will be indicated on qualifications at levels 6 and 7. Nevertheless, all legislative documents in the field of higher education, adopted after the introduction of the BQF, call for an explicit mention of the BQF level (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.3. Qualifications databases and registers

In 2016, NAVET developed a [register](#) of documents issued for people who have undergone training. The register targets certificate holders and (potential) employers in ensuring the validity of the vocational qualification document received. It currently includes approximately 70 000 certificates for vocational qualifications at BQF levels 2 to 5. Certificates for the remaining BQF qualification types are not included in the register. The register includes information in Bulgarian on the field of study, BQF/EQF level, awarding body and credit points (in the form of the number of hours required to achieve the relevant learning outcome). The education ministry maintains a register of diplomas for secondary and higher education, without indicating the BQF/EQF level (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. Awareness and use of the NQF

A 2019 national consultation with stakeholders showed that there is room

to raise awareness of the BQF (Section). NAVET, through its day-to day work on state education standards and the list of VET professions, promotes the framework to its stakeholders, raising awareness mainly among education and training practitioners.

The BQF level descriptors reflect the legal acts governing education and training, while learning outcomes have played an important role in revising and renewing qualifications in general, vocational and higher education, particularly through state educational standards. These standards are also an important element of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Learning outcomes are a feature of the quality assurance framework developed by the National Inspectorate of Education. The BQF has begun to provide a common language for qualifications from different education subsystems. In legislation, the framework is used to determine the entry requirements for each level. The BQF supports the validation of prior learning and the recognition of qualifications by employers.

6.5. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

A national consultation with stakeholders – including education providers, students, employers, experts and government officials – was carried out in 2018 to assess the impact of the framework and to inform further developments (NAVET, 2019). It was found that over 75 % of survey participants were somewhat familiar with the BQF. Other findings included the need to provide more targeted information to employers and citizens; the need to improve awareness of the links between the BQF, the EQF and the state education standards; the need to more closely link the framework to the quality of training; and the need to facilitate the validation and recognition of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

6.6. Impact of the NQF

There is relatively little information so far on the role of the BQF in promoting lifelong learning and in supporting access, progression and adult participation in education and training and the conditions under which this role is carried out. Nevertheless, NAVET, on the basis of the experience gained by the implementation of the BQF, has extended the use of state educational standards in VET and introduced the main principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Generally, the BQF is particularly important for VET, and for integrating vulnerable groups into the labour market by providing them with the opportunity to obtain a qualification at

BQF/EQF level 2 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Referencing to the EQF

The BQF for lifelong learning was referenced to the EQF and self-certified against the QF-EHEA in May 2013. The referencing report has not yet been published on the official EQF website.

Important lessons and future plans

Mainly through state educational standards, there has been considerable progress in promoting the learning-outcomes approach in general and vocational education, and in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Implementing the BQF at the institutional level has been challenging, particularly in higher education. For the BQF to achieve its aims, sustained implementation efforts are required.

Stakeholders (including state institutions) in some economic sectors (IT, machinery, transport) have started discussions regarding sectoral qualifications at levels 2 to 7 of the BQF, including labour market needs, current possibilities and horizontal and vertical permeability. Future steps could include disseminating the framework to raise public awareness.

Main sources of information

URLs accessed 6 June 2023

- [International Cooperation Directorate](#), Ministry of Education, Youth and Science.
- [National Agency for Vocational Education and Training \(NAVET\)](#)

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral degree (Доктор)	8
7	Master's degree (Магистър)	7
6	Bachelor's degree (Бакалавър) Professional bachelor's degree (Професионален Бакалавър)	6
5	Vocational qualification - national VET level 4 (IV Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	5
4	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (Средно Образование Общо Образование) Vocational qualification - national VET level 3 (III Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	4
3	Vocational qualification - national VET level 2 (II Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	3
2	Lower-secondary (basic education) certificate (grades 5-7) (Основно Образование) Vocational qualification - national VET level 1 (I Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	2
1	Primary education certificate (grades 1-4) (Начален Етап На Основното Образование)	1
0	Pre-primary education (Подготвително Ниво - Предучилищно Образование)	No EQF level

Acronyms

BQF	Bulgarian qualifications framework for lifelong learning (Национална квалификационна рамка за учене през целия живот)
EQF	European qualifications framework
NAVET	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (Националната агенция за професионално образование и обучение)
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework for the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

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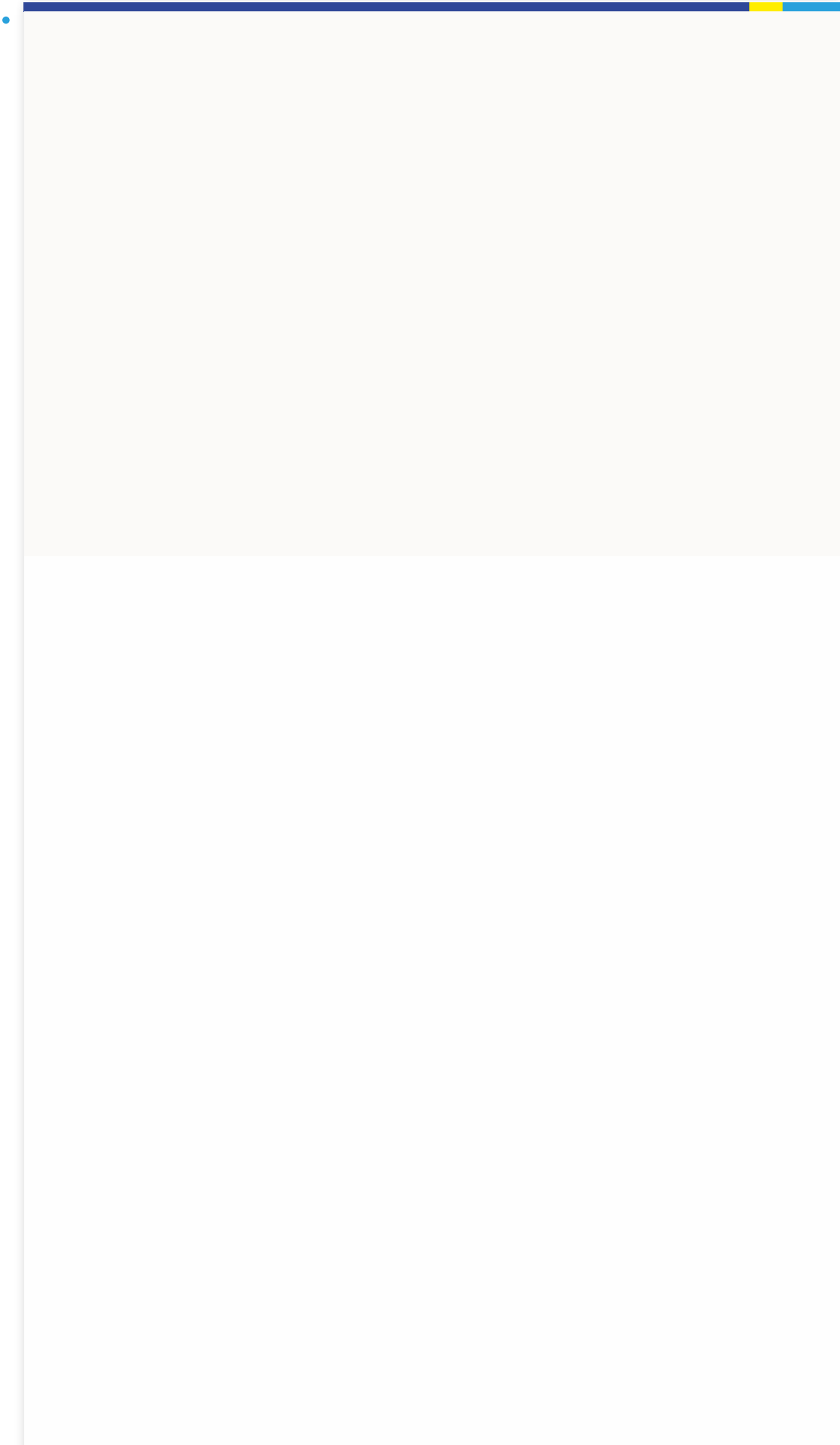
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