

NQF state of play



Germany 2022

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Overview

Stage of development: [Operational stage](#)

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training (general education, initial VET, regulated further training and higher education).

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Joint resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Economic Affairs and the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Technology (2013)
([in German](#))

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

[DQR qualifications database](#)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

Participation in early childhood education (93.7 %) has decreased by 2.1 percentage points in the last decade but in 2020 was still above the EU average (93.0 %). The rate of early leaving from education and training (11.8 % in 2021) is higher than the EU average (9.7 %). Disparities in educational outcomes caused by socioeconomic and migrant background remain a challenge. In 2021, tertiary educational attainment (ages 25–34) was 35.7 %, below the EU-27 average (41.2 %) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). In 2020, participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) was at the EU average (48.8 %), and participation in post-secondary VET was 94.5 %. In short-cycle tertiary education, vocational pathways are the only option ([1]).

The integration of the DQR into the policies of different education sectors is an evolutionary process, although up to 2022 it had seldom been explicitly referred to in specific policy initiatives. However, some of its underpinning concepts, such as the learning outcomes approach or the notion of parity of esteem, are widely accepted among policymakers and play a role in political discourse (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). References to the DQR and its categories have already been made in instruments regulating formal education and training, such as in the framework curricula for part-time vocational schools (*Berufsschule*) of the *Länder*, while VET training regulations have been designed as more competence oriented since 2015. The DQR has also been a driving force to strengthen regulated further vocational training (at DQR/EQF levels 5–7) and improve its quality. For instance, a three-level structure was developed and included in the Vocational Training Act, in force since January 2020. New titles of regulated further vocational training programmes and related qualifications ([2]) at levels 5–7 underline their equivalence to academic education.

1.2. NQF legal basis

Reflecting the federal structure of Germany, the formal basis of the DQR is the joint resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK)), Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF)), Conference of Ministers of Economics of the *Länder* and German Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, which entered into force on 1 May 2013 ([3]). It paved the way to the DQR's full implementation, defined the responsibilities of different stakeholders and set up supporting tools and methodologies, including the DQR database and handbook. This resolution

was the basis for administrative regulations, such as indicating DQR/EQF levels on certificates and diplomas and their supplements. Discussion on whether a binding legal basis for the DQR (e.g. an act of parliament) should be created in the future has started, but no concrete initiative has been taken yet (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Policy objectives

The DQR aims to increase the transparency and comparability of German qualifications, and overall coherence and permeability in the education, training, and qualification system.

According to the German EQF referencing report, the DQR aims to (BMBF and KMK, 2013):

- a. increase transparency in German qualifications and aid their recognition elsewhere in Europe;
- b. support learner and employee mobility between Germany and other European countries and within Germany;
- c. improve the visibility of equivalence and differences between qualifications and promote permeability;
- d. promote reliability, transfer opportunities and quality assurance;
- e. increase the skills orientation of qualifications;
- f. reinforce the learning outcomes orientation of qualification processes;
- g. improve opportunities for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- h. encourage and improve access to, and participation in, lifelong learning.

In 2022, the main functions of the DQR were to increase the transparency of the German qualification system, to improve the comparability of qualifications, and to promote permeability, quality assurance and trust within the existing system of qualifications. Learners' mobility between levels and institutions should be further promoted, limiting formal and institutional barriers. The focus is on delivering and structuring information about the qualification system. Stakeholders agree that the DQR is not intended to affect or modify the legal status of qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

An eight-level structure has been adopted to cover all main types of German qualifications.

Level descriptors describe the competences required to obtain a qualification. The overall structure is guided by the established German terminological and conceptual approach, referring to the ability to act (*Handlungskompetenz*) (BMBF and KMK, 2013). The DQR differentiates between two categories of competence: professional and personal. The term competence lies at the heart of the DQR and signals readiness to use knowledge, skills, and personal, social and methodological competences in work or study situations and for professional and personal development. Competence is understood in this sense as comprehensive action competence (Table 1). Methodological competence is understood as a transversal competence and is not separately stated in the DQR matrix. The DQR expresses only selected characteristics; the comprehensive and integrated notion of competence, underlying the DQR, has a strong humanistic and educational dimension ([4]).

Descriptors are partly expressed as alternatives, such as ‘field of study or work’ and ‘specialised field of study or field of occupational activity’. The broad and inclusive nature of level descriptors, using parallel formulations if necessary, makes it possible to open up all levels to different kinds of qualifications; higher levels are not restricted to qualifications awarded within the Bologna process (Section 4.2). The table of level descriptors (DQR matrix) and a glossary are included in the DQR outline.

Table 1. **Level descriptors in the German qualifications framework for lifelong learning**

Level indicator			
Structure of requirements			
Professional competence	Personal competence		
Knowledge	Skills	Social competence	Autonomy

Depth and breadth	Instrumental and systemic skills, judgement	Team/leadership skills, involvement and communication	Autonomous responsibility/responsibility, reflectiveness and learning competence
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*Source:*BMBF and KMK (2013), p. 197.

Each reference level maps comparable/equivalent, rather than homogeneous, qualifications. A key principle of the DQR is that ‘each qualification level should always be accessible via various educational pathways’ (BMBF and KMK, 2013, p. 198).

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The DQR is a comprehensive framework, including all levels and types of qualifications. Qualifications from initial VET, higher education, general education and regulated further training ([5]) have been levelled to the DQR and linked to the EQF. Levelling of qualifications to the DQR is carried out by DQR bodies in accordance with a defined procedure. Each proposal is reviewed by the responsible DQR body.

Regarding qualifications awarded outside regulated formal education and training, a pilot procedure has been carried out and evaluated. A working group has designed procedures for levelling such qualifications, defined quality assurance criteria and described the role of evaluators. In 2023, an introductory phase of the process is expected to start; selected qualifications awarded outside formal education and training will be levelled to the DQR.

VET qualifications were allocated from levels 1 to 7. One example is allocation of the master craftsperson qualification to level 6, equivalent to higher education bachelors, which shows that higher DQR levels are open to qualifications from different education sectors and regarded as comparable.

The number of qualifications included in the DQR is increasing, albeit at a slow pace. As of August 2022, a total of 1 240 individual qualifications were included in the DQR, with the largest numbers at levels 4 (639) and 6 (463). Since 2020, the total number of qualifications included in the DQR has increased by 15. This change in numbers is due to the regular update of the list of recognised training occupations, which automatically affects the number of qualifications covered by a specific qualification type (e.g. dual VET courses at level 4). There has been no individual levelling of any new qualification or qualification type since 2019 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

The DQR level descriptors support the restructuring of initial and continuing

VET training plans (curricula) and are increasingly used also for designing qualifications in the non-formal sector (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

In school education, the country aims to further develop quality assurance measures and improve the comparability of qualifications and the mobility of learners. The introduction of educational standards binding on all *Länder* and the establishment of the Institute for Educational Quality Improvement (*Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen* (IQB)) to review and develop them marked the beginning of a paradigm shift towards output-oriented control of education. The IQB Educational Trends studies (*IQB-Bildungstrends*) review the implementation of educational standards in primary (grade 4) and lower secondary (grade 9) education ([6]).

Since 2016/2017, the resolution of educational standards for the *Allgemeine Hochschulreife* (general higher education entrance qualification) and the establishment of a pool of *Abitur* (school-leaving examination) tasks in German, mathematics and advanced foreign languages (common to all *Länder*) have guaranteed the comparability and high quality of *Abitur* tasks ([7]) ([8]).

In VET, continuous development of the concept of *Handlungskompetenz* has gradually assumed a key role in defining qualifications. These competence-based qualifications are structured in 'learning fields', allowing general subjects and occupational skills to be acquired in authentic labour market settings. Having been used for more than two decades, this competence-based approach also facilitates a stronger emphasis on transversal skills and competences that are seen as highly relevant in a context of rapid technological and occupational change (Kittel et al., 2021).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

Owing to the distribution of responsibilities between the *Länder* and the federal government in matters of qualifications, there is no single body for the overall coordination and oversight of the DQR. The main institutions at national level are the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Standing Conference of Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The body in charge of DQR implementation (NQF secretariat) is the coordination point for the German qualifications framework (*Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle* (B-L-KS)), set up by a joint initiative of the federal government and the *Länder*. The B-L-KS also assumes the function of the national coordination point for the EQF. It has six members, including representatives from the BMBF, the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy, the KMK and the Conference of Ministers for Economics of the *Länder*. Its main role is to monitor allocation of qualifications to ensure consistency in the overall DQR structure.

The work of the B-L-KS as the EQF NCP is supported by the appropriate units of the BMBF and the secretariat of the KMK, which supply the necessary administrative staff. The units collaborate in performing their tasks.

Stakeholders such as education providers from higher education, general education and VET, social partners, ministries, public institutions from education and from the labour market, researchers and practitioners participate in the DQR working group (*Arbeitskreis DQR*), which serves as an advisory body for the B-L-KS. Decisions are based on consensus, and all of the members work closely with their respective institutions and organisations. The DQR working group has contributed greatly to improving the communication and cooperation between this wide range of stakeholders.

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

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

Implementation of the DQR, with its focus on learning outcomes, has also strengthened work on making non-formal and informal learning more visible and comparable, underlying the importance of what a learner knows, understands and can do. However, it is not directly linked to any existing validation procedure (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Various arrangements permit full or partial recognition of informally or non-formally acquired competences, supporting the transition from one education sector to another, particularly between VET and higher education. However, they should be promoted further to reach a wider audience ([9]).

In VET, the external students' examination (*Externenprüfung*) leads to a full qualification (equal to those formally acquired) in a recognised apprenticeship. General education school-leaving certificates can be also acquired through an external examination (*Schulfremdenprüfung, Externenprüfung, Nichtschülerprüfung*) in all *Länder*, if one fulfils the residence and minimum age requirements and provides evidence of appropriate examination preparation. Admission to examinations in the context of regulated further vocational training qualifications, such as *Handwerksmeister* (master craftsperson), is also possible through validation: access is granted by work experience only, while preparatory training is not compulsory. Two KMK decisions, in place since March 2009, provide the basis for validation in higher education. The first offers the option to qualified workers holding certain vocational qualifications, but without an upper secondary qualification, to be admitted to higher education. The second refers to granting credits for competences acquired at work. According to these decisions, knowledge and skills acquired outside higher education can be recognised up to a maximum of 50% of a formal qualification. Procedures to credit non-formal and informal learning were developed and tested in the Transitions from VET to higher education initiative (*Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung* (ANKOM)) ([10]). Although the goal is that, in addition to formal qualifications, non-formally and informally acquired competences will be levelled to the DQR on an equal footing, this is not feasible yet. The DQR bodies are currently discussing such a levelling procedure ([11]).

5.2. Recognition of foreign qualifications

The Professional Qualifications Assessment Act/Recognition Act ([12]), introduced in April 2012, gives individuals the right to have their foreign-

acquired qualifications matched to a German qualification by a competent authority. Equivalence can be granted even when no proof of prior learning can be provided; this opens up opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The DQR is being used as a complementary source of information about qualifications, but in principle the recognition procedure operates independently of the DQR (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The DQR has reached operational status. For instance, the DQR provides a map of, and reference to, all nationally recognised qualifications apart from those from the non-formal sector. NQF levels are indicated on Europass diploma supplements and some certificates (Section 7.2), while the DQR database includes information on all single DQR qualifications. Although other implementation stage indicators ([13]) have been achieved to some extent, this cannot be attributed entirely to the DQR's influence (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

DQR/EQF levels have been indicated on VET certificates from level 3 and above, and the relevant Europass certificate supplements. DQR/EQF levels are also indicated on education diploma supplements of all bachelor's and master's degrees (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Since 2018 there has been work on indicating DQR and EQF levels on general education diplomas (in line with the practice of the 16 *Länder*) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). DQR and EQF levels are indicated in all qualifications included in the DQR qualifications database. It is intended for DQR/EQF levels to be automatically indicated on VET certificates; several responsible bodies, such as chambers, already implement this ([14]).

As the DQR level structure matches the EQF one exactly, the EQF levels can be regarded as merely an additional piece of information. They can be relevant to the transnational comparison of German qualifications.

6.3. NQF dissemination

The DQR handbook ([15]) outlines the criteria and procedures for describing qualifications in accordance with the DQR principles, and ensures that the future levelling of newly developed or substantially revised qualifications always takes place according to these criteria. The handbook includes guidelines to providers on how to request the inclusion of qualifications in the DQR. It targets three main groups: competent institutions in the different education sectors, the professional community and citizens (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. Qualifications databases and registers

All qualifications allocated to the DQR/EQF have been included in the comprehensive DQR qualifications database (1 240, as of August 2022). The

database is hosted on the DQR website under the title 'Qualification search' (*Qualifikationssuche*), a function allowing users to identify the DQR level of a specific qualification, or to learn which qualifications are allocated to a given level ([16]). The database includes, for each qualification, information in German and English about the title of the qualification, DQR/EQF level, education field, description (as an open text) of what the learner is expected to know, understand and able to do, awarding body or competent authority, as well as entry requirements and pathways to acquire the qualification (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

There is variation in the learning outcomes descriptions. They can be presented either as running text or as bullet points, while their length varies as well. Shortened/summary versions of these are used in Europass certificate supplements and Europass diploma supplements. The database and the corresponding list of qualifications are updated annually to include newly assigned qualifications and/or changes in the scope of already levelled qualification types. The database is connected to the Europass platform (via the Qualifications Dataset Register), while the DQR website includes links to the Europass portal and the Federal Employment Agency's portal ([17]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

Implementation of the DQR is a joint process involving a whole range of stakeholders in different parts of education and training and on the labour market; all stakeholders use their channels to communicate the DQR to their target groups.

The DQR is known and used by the organisations that are responsible for awarding qualifications with a DQR / an EQF level. For instance, the NQF competence descriptions are used for restructuring initial and continuing VET training regulations and plans. There is also continuing interest among providers of non-formal and private qualifications, which use the DQR descriptors as a competence model when designing qualifications.

Citizens regularly contact the B-L-KS asking for information about the position of a specific qualification within the DQR, or the requirements for achieving a qualification at a specific DQR level. Such enquiries imply that learners are often aware of the DQR and consider it when deciding which learning opportunity to follow. Workers and jobseekers, trying to access a job and further learning, usually ask for information on whether a qualification is recognised by the labour market and if qualifications assigned to the same DQR level are equivalent. The flow of such enquiries has remained stable since 2020 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

There are no representative data on the use of the DQR by labour market stakeholders; however, as employers and trade unions are involved in the

design and renewal of qualifications, for example in VET, they use the DQR and its level descriptors. Experience also shows that some employers use the DQR when developing job profiles and qualifications requirements in job openings, and when assessing candidates. However, the DQR level of a certain qualification is at best a subcriterion. Trade unions sometimes use the DQR in the context of collective agreements. Occasionally, the B-L-KS receives questions from employers (particularly from the public sector) on the implications of DQR levels for job openings and recruitment procedures (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

There are no data available, but experience shows that recognition authorities use the DQR as a complementary source of information about qualifications within existing recognition procedures (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

6.6. Impact of the NQF

No comprehensive DQR evaluation has been carried out. However, the DQR has enhanced the transparency and comparability of qualifications across different subsystems of the formal education system in Germany (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The DQR has facilitated transparency between VET and higher education, thus having an impact on the practice of accreditation. For example, universities and universities of applied sciences increasingly use the DQR within procedures for accrediting competences acquired in other education sectors. The DQR has contributed to promoting permeability in education and training, reducing barriers between sectors and institutions. It is also reported that the DQR has considerably enhanced parity of esteem, especially between VET and higher education. With the allocation, introduction and development of VET qualifications at DQR levels 6 and 7, the parity became visible. This is also reflected in the increasing willingness of universities to recognise competences acquired outside higher education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The DQR has affected the design of qualifications standards. For instance, the level descriptors are increasingly used for designing qualifications in the non-formal sector. It also has an impact on quality assurance of regulated continuing VET qualifications; its competence model and level descriptors serve as one source of information among others when it comes to the formulation of quality criteria (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Referencing to the EQF

The DQR was referenced to the EQF in 2012 (BMBF and KMK, 2013). The qualifications framework for higher education, now an integral part of the DQR, was self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area in 2008. There are currently no plans to update the referencing report (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Important lessons and future plans

A major element of the DQR's development and implementation is the committed involvement of stakeholders from education and training, and from the labour market, ministries and *Länder*. The DQR working group provides a forum for reaching consensus, ensuring full support by stakeholders. Creating and sustaining mutual understanding and trust between stakeholders from different education sectors is seen as a key success factor and a challenge, as reaching decisions on the further implementation of the DQR can be time-consuming (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The DQR makes it possible to identify and understand better the similarities and differences between qualifications in different areas of education and training. A permeable system, with better horizontal and vertical progression possibilities, is at the heart of DQR implementation, as is parity of esteem between VET and higher education.

Future plans include discussions on criteria and procedures to include qualifications from the non-formal sector. The discussion of whether the legal basis of the DQR needs to be revised continues (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 5.4.2023]

- DQR [website](#).
- DQR qualifications [database](#).
- BMBF and KMK (2013). *German EQF Referencing Report*.

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctorate and equivalent arts degrees (Doktorat und äquivalente künstlerische Abschlüsse)	8
7	Master's degrees and equivalent higher education qualifications (traditional German courses of higher education study such as the first degrees of Diplom or Magister, state examinations) (Master und gleichgestellte Abschlüsse (Diplom, Magister, Staatsexamen)) Strategic professional (IT) (certified) (Strategische/r IT Professional (Geprüfte/r)) Other advanced vocational training pursuant to the Vocational Training Act or Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (level 7) (Sonstige berufliche Fortbildungsqualifikationen nach BBiG/HwO (Niveau 7))	7

6

Bachelor's degrees and equivalent higher education qualifications (Bachelor und gleichgestellte Hochschulabschlüsse)

Specialist commercial clerk (certified) (Fachkaufmann/-frau (Geprüfte/r))

Business management specialist (certified) (Fachwirt (Geprüfter))

Master craftsman (Meister)

Operative professional (IT) (certified) (Operative/r Professional (IT) (Geprüfte/r))

Trade and technical school (advanced vocational training governed by federal state law) (Fachschule (Landesrechtlich geregelte berufliche Weiterbildungen))

Advanced vocational training pursuant to Article 54 of the Vocational Training Act (level 6) (Berufliche Fortbildungsqualifikationen nach § 54 BBiG (Niveau 6))

Other advanced vocational training pursuant to the Vocational Training Act or Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (level 6) (Sonstige berufliche Fortbildungsqualifikationen nach BBiG/HwO (Niveau 6))

6

5

IT specialist (IT-Spezialist/in (Zertifizierte/r))

Service technician (certified) (Servicetechniker/in (Geprüfte/r))

Advanced vocational training pursuant to Article 54 of the Vocational Training Act (Berufliche Fortbildungsqualifikationen nach § 54 BBiG (Niveau 5))

Other advanced vocational training pursuant to the Vocational Training Act or Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (level 5) (Sonstige berufliche Fortbildungsqualifikationen nach BBiG/HwO (Niveau 5))

5

4

Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate - General higher education entrance qualification (Allgemeine Hochschulreife (AHR))

Subject-linked higher education entrance qualification (Fachgebundene Hochschulreife (FgbHR))

Higher education entrance qualification for university of applied sciences (Fachhochschulreife (FHR))

Dual VET (3-year and 3.5-year training courses) (Duale Berufsausbildung (3- und 3 ½-jährige Ausbildungen))

Full-time vocational school (vocational education and training governed by federal state law) (Berufsfachschule (Landesrechtlich geregelte Berufsausbildungen))

Full-time vocational school (vocational education and training governed by federal law in healthcare and elderly care) (Berufsfachschule (Bundesrechtliche Ausbildungsregelungen für Berufe im Gesundheitswesen und in der Altenpflege))

Full-time vocational school (fully qualifying VET pursuant to the Vocational Training Act or Crafts and Trades Regulation Code) (Berufsfachschule (vollqualifizierende Berufsausbildung nach BBiG/HwO))

Retraining qualification pursuant to the Vocational Training Act (level 4) (Berufliche Umschulung nach BBiG (Niveau 4))

4

3

Intermediate secondary school leaving certificate - General education, 10 years (Mittlerer Schulabschluss (MSA))

Intermediate secondary school leaving certificate - Full-time vocational school (Berufsfachschule (Mittlerer Schulabschluss))

Dual VET (2-year training courses) (Duale Berufsausbildung (2-jährige Ausbildung))

3

2	Lower secondary school leaving certificate - General education, 9 years (Erster Schulabschluss (ESA)) Vocational training preparation (vocational preparation scheme, prevocational training year, introductory training) (Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung (Niveau 2; BvB, BvB-Reha, BVJ, EQ)) Basic vocational training - Full-time vocational school (Berufsfachschule (Berufliche Grundbildung))	2
1	Vocational training preparation (vocational preparation scheme, prevocational training year) (Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung (Niveau 1; BvB, BvB-Reha, BVJ))	1

Acronyms

ANKOM	<i>Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung</i> [transitions from vocational high school education]
B-L-KS	Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle [national coordination point]
BMBF	Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [Federal Ministry of Education and Research]
DQR	<i>Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen für lebenslanges Lernen</i> [German qualifications framework for lifelong learning]
EQF	European qualifications framework
IQB	Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen [Institute for Educational Quality Improvement]
IT	Information technology
KMK	Kultusministerkonferenz [Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the <i>Länder</i> in the Federal Republic of Germany]
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

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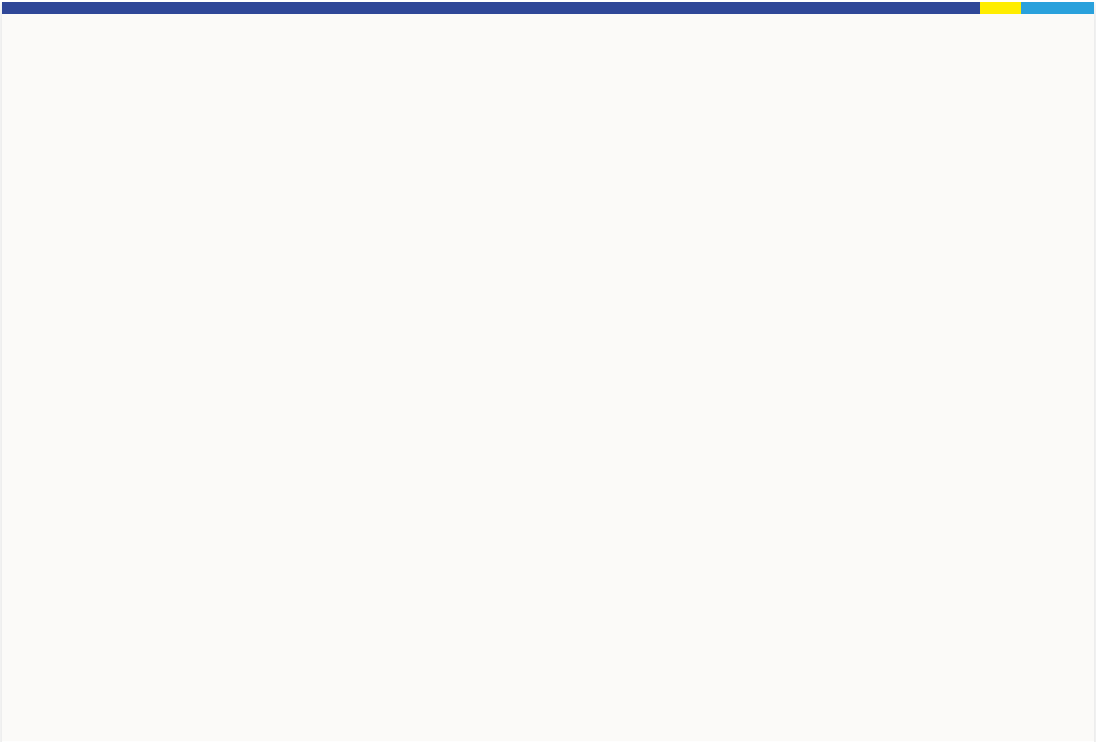
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Related content



2022

Germany - European inventory of NQFs 2022

European inventory of NQF



Germany