

NQF state of play



Bulgaria 2024

Table of contents

- Chapter 1 - Overview
- Chapter 2 - Introduction and context
- Chapter 3 - Policy objectives
- Chapter 4 - Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications
- Chapter 5 - Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement
- Chapter 6 - Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways
- Chapter 7 - NQF implementation and impact
- Chapter 8 - Referencing to the EQF
- Chapter 9 - Important lessons and future plans
- Chapter 10 - Main sources of information
- Chapter 11 - National qualification framework (NQF)
- Chapter 12 - Acronyms
- Chapter 13 - References

Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes qualifications from all levels and subsystems of formal education and training: pre-primary, primary and secondary general education, VET and higher education.

Number of levels:

Eight plus a preparatory level (0), 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 2022, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (3.9%) was below the EU average (4.7%). The country has a relatively low level of participation in early childhood education (80.4% in 2022); in 2023, its rate of early leaving from education and training was significantly decreased going below the EU average (9.3% and 9.5% respectively). In the same year, tertiary education attainment (age 25-34) (35.8%) was also below the EU-27 (44.2%) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024). Participation in upper secondary VET amounted to 56.0% in 2023 (above the EU average 49.1%) ([1]). The employment rate of VET graduates increased to 78.4% in 2023, moving closer to the EU average (81.0%). The participation of adults in lifelong learning remains well below the EU average (9.5% vs 39.5% in 2022). The share of citizens aged 15-29 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) was 13.8% in 2023 (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024).

The national project Modernisation of VET is creating, through sector skill councils, a new list of VET qualifications. BQF/EQF levels are a structural component of the list (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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, and learning-outcome units ([2]). The 2024 [amendment](#) of the VET act reinforces the role of the BQF levels as a structural element of the official List of the professions for VET (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). 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, especially in designing education provision;
- d. supporting the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- e. fostering lifelong learning;
- f. increasing cooperation between stakeholders.

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 & 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.

Currently there are 592 VET full qualifications included in the BQF at levels 2 to 5 (mostly at levels 4 and 3). They are linked to the 271 professions described in the list of professions for VET ([4]). Partial qualifications (certificates of vocational training) are levelled to the BQF according to the level of the full vocational qualification ([5]). Validation can lead to BQF vocational full and partial qualifications ([6]); validation certificates indicate the BQF level ([7]) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Through the 'development of digital skills' project, 565 unified competence profiles for digital skills were created and validated (Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024) ([8]). These profiles are linked to the BQF ([9]).

Partial qualifications and validation certificates for partial qualifications in a profession could be considered as microcredentials. They comply with all the elements described in the Council recommendation on a European

approach to microcredentials (Cedefop, 2023; Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024). However, no formal regulation has yet been introduced regarding microcredentials. In 2023, The Economic and social council of the Republic of Bulgaria suggested that the policy discussion on the possibility of including micro-certificates in the BQF (provided they are recognised as part of the education system) should start (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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 ([10]). 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 & ReferNet, 2024).

In VET, a legal definition exists of the term 'learning outcomes'. State educational standards for acquiring vocational qualifications and examination requirements use the learning-outcomes approach. This was a prerequisite for implementing the validation procedure and awarding credits. The 2024 [amendment](#) of the VET act has introduced broader qualifications, dropping specialisations. The Modernisation of VET project has set up the sector skills councils, which are currently creating the new shorter list of professions for VET. Through the project the broader qualifications with various occupational qualification degrees are developed (NQF/EQF levels 2 to 5), as well as the new State educational standards; the qualifications are composed by units of learning outcomes. Each standard determines units of learning outcomes related to the general, sectoral and specific part of the curriculum. From 2026 onwards, to obtain a VET partial qualifications learners should complete at least three units of learning outcomes with at least one unit from the specific part of the curriculum. The structural components of the new list are fields of education, professional fields, professions and degrees of professional qualification and BQF/EQF levels (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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](#).

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 & ReferNet, 2024).

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 NAVET. 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 referencing report 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 (NCP).

The [National Agency for Vocational Education and Training \(NAVET\)](#) is a specialised body operating under the supervision of the Council of Ministers, supporting the development of high-quality VET. The agency is responsible for qualifications at levels 2 to 5 and for assigning each to a certain BQF level. NAVET is also responsible for coordinating VET centres of adults at the national level, and for developing/updating the list of VET professions and educational standards for VET 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 (European Commission & 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

One of the aims of the BQF is to promote VNFIL, however validation arrangements are predominantly related to VET (Dzhengozova, 2024).

Validation using state education standards can lead to full or partial VET qualifications at BQF levels 2 to 5 or give access to the relevant programmes. Partial qualifications acquired through validation are stackable and can be combined leading to a full VET qualification in the BQF. The 2024 amendment of the VET act has introduced the possibility of issuing a validation document for only one unit of learning outcome ([11]). Vocational knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal or informal learning are compared against the intended units of learning outcomes described in state educational standards. While there are no explicit quality assurance indicators for validation, current legislation stipulates that institutions must put in place an internal quality assurance system. Participation in validation procedures has increased. In 2024, almost 5,000 individuals participated, with most of them obtaining a full VET qualification. The assistant educator, baker-pastry chef, chef, energy equipment and plant technician were some of the most popular qualifications ([12]). (Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024). Certificates acquired through validation differ, in title and description, from those issued in VET: the former describe validated competences ([13]) 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 ([14]) (Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; Dzhengozova, 2024).

The education ministry has recently started an Erasmus+ project, aiming to develop and test validation arrangements in higher education. The project objective is to promote the social dimension of higher education by validating the prior learning and ensuring access to quality education for learners from vulnerable groups (Dzhengozova, 2024).

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 units 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. 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. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

BQF qualifications were included and levelled to the framework in accordance with the national legislation; the same applies for new qualifications. Higher education qualifications are automatically included in the BQF since although higher education institutions are autonomous, they are accredited to provide such programmes. Vocational qualifications are linked to professions described in the list of professions for VET. The procedure for inclusion of new vocational qualifications in the BQF is equivalent to the procedure for inclusion of professions in the list of professions for VET, which is legislatively regulated, ensuring transparency. The labour ministry along with sectoral ministries and employee and employer organisation also participate in the procedure for including new professions in the list. Stakeholders can submit proposals for inclusion in the list and participate in the coordination procedure; the latter strengthens mutual trust in the entire process (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth & Science, 2013).

6.3. 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. It is planned that BQF/EQF levels will be indicated on qualifications from other education subsystems. Nevertheless, legislative documents in pre-school, school and higher education, adopted after the introduction of the BQF, call for an explicit mention of the BQF level (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. 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 related profession. The education ministry maintains a register of diplomas for secondary and higher education, without indicating the BQF/EQF level (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

A 2019 national consultation with stakeholders showed that there is room to raise awareness of the BQF. Awareness is higher among VET stakeholders. 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 providers. VET learners are aware of the BQF as the levels are indicated on their certificate. Workers and job-seekers have moderate level of awareness, while labour market stakeholders are well aware of it, especially employment services. Employer representatives and trade unions are aware and use the framework as they often provide VET training courses and validation arrangements, while they also participate in NAVET's expert committees and managing board (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024)

The BQF level descriptors reflect the legal acts governing education and training. The framework is used to determine the entry requirements for each level. 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.

6.6. 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.

6.7. Impact of the NQF

The BQF has begun to provide a common language for qualifications from different education subsystems and clear information about the knowledge, skills, and competences associated with each qualification level. Labour market stakeholders have an overall positive perception on the impact of the BQF on employability. The BQF supports the validation of prior learning and the recognition of qualifications by employers. NAVET, on the basis of the experience gained by the implementation of the BQF, has extended the use of units of learning outcomes through the state educational standards in VET. Another main function of the framework is to promote mobility in education, training, and the labour market, as well as to validate and recognize prior learning, whether formal and informal. 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 & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

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. Overall, there is an uneven implementation of the BQF among education and training subsystems, as the considerable progress made in VET is not visible in other subsystems. For the BQF to achieve its aims, sustained implementation efforts are required.

Future steps include the opening up of the framework to additional types of microcredentials.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 15/4/2025]

[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) Example: Computer networks designer/Проектант компютърни мрежи	5
4	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (Средно Образование Общо Образование) Vocational qualification - national VET level 3 (III Степен На Професионална Квалификация) Example: Healthcare assistant/Здравен асистент	4
3	Vocational qualification - national VET level 2 (II Степен На Професионална Квалификация) Example: Social assistant/Социален асистент	3
2	Lower-secondary (basic education) certificate (grades 5-7) (Основно Образование) Vocational qualification - national VET level 1 (I Степен На Професионална Квалификация) Example: Gardening /Работник в озеленяването	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

References

[URLs accessed 15/4/2025]

Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth & Science. (2013). *Referencing the NQF of the Republic of Bulgaria to the EQF and to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area* [unpublished].

Cedefop. (2023). [Microcredentials for labour market education and training: microcredentials and evolving qualifications systems](#).

Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper, 89.

Cedefop & ReferNet. (2024). [Timeline of VET policies in Europe](#) [online tool].

Dzhengozova, M. (2024). [European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update: Bulgaria](#). European Commission & Cedefop.

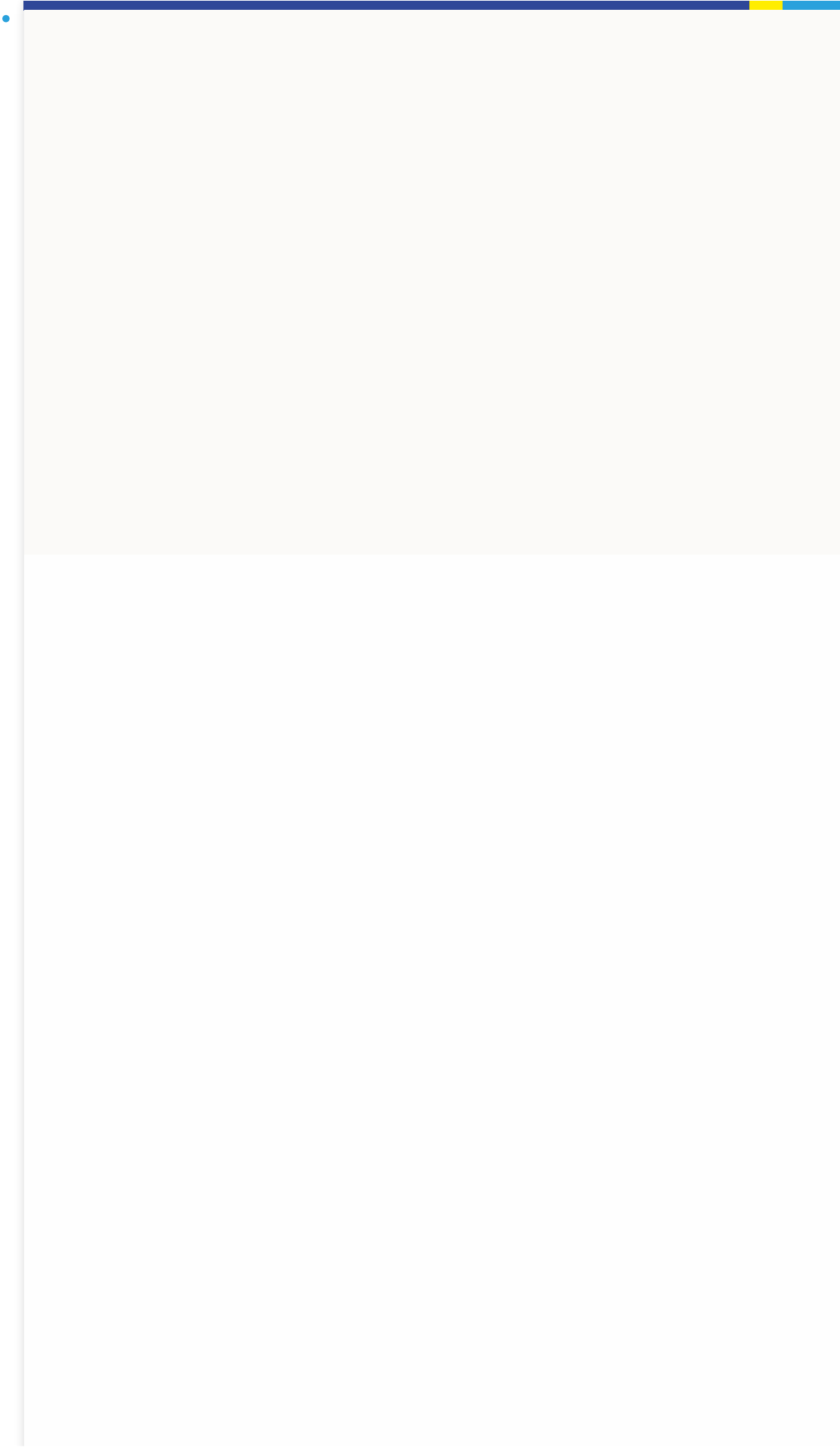
European Commission & Cedefop. (2022). *Survey on implementation, use and impact of NQF/EQF*. [unpublished].

European Commission & Cedefop. (2024). *Survey on implementation, use and impact of NQF/EQF*. [unpublished].

European Commission. DG Education Youth Sport & Culture. (2024). [Education and training monitor 2024: Bulgaria](#). Publications Office of the European Union.

NAVET. (2019). [Анализ за оценяване на въздействието на НКР в България](#) [Analysis for assessing the impact of NQF in Bulgaria].

Related content



2024

Bulgaria - European inventory of NQFs 2024

European inventory of NQF

 Bulgaria