



EQF-Ref

Wp3: EQF Referencing Process – Exchange of Experience

Case study The Netherlands

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1. Introduction

The aims of the EQF-Ref project are threefold:

- Exchange of experience regarding the approaches planned or taken in the EQF referencing process;
- Analysing, comparing and evaluating different approaches;
- Identification of “good practices”.

The input for these aims has to come from National Case Studies describing the progress of the EQF implementation for each of the countries participating in this project. The primal focus has to be on the way countries are organising the self-referencing process, the procedure foreseen to link national (NQF) levels to the eight EQF levels. It is agreed that all National case studies will be based on expert interviews and an analyses of documents/research reports.

This report reflects the state of affairs in the Netherlands mid 2009. It will give an accurate description of the initiatives taken so far and the actions foreseen between now and the end of 2010. Spring 2009 the Ministry of Education decided upon the basic principles of the Dutch NQF, the roadmap for the production of this NQF and the procedure for linking the NQF to the EQF in 2010¹.

As this procedure is not in execution yet an interview with the ‘architect’ of the procedures and the documents produced so far, Mrs. Karin van de Sanden, will do to describe the situation in the Netherlands late summer 2009.

¹ Until this moment, stakeholders from other school sectors assume at attitude of expectation.

2. NQF Development and Implementation

2.1 Status quo of the development of the NQF

To put it mildly, the Netherlands were not in the forefront in terms of implementing the European Framework for Life Long Learning. This is not only noticed at European level², but also in the Netherlands³. It was not before 2007 that the Ministry of Education commissioned a study concerning the implementation of EQF and its potential impact⁴. The EIM report reported a distinct lack of knowledge about the EQF initiative amongst the stakeholders. It was also reported that many stakeholders foresaw implications at system level when implementing the eight EQF levels, and as system discussions are extremely sensitive in this country, the EQF implementation needed to be carefully orchestrated. Despite this conclusion, the EIM report came up with an eight level NLQF for the Netherlands, only covering for HE and VET and ‘forgetting’ to include General Education, Adult Education and private education but only referential to these two subsystems. It was no surprise that this report was not accepted as a starting point for the EQF implementation process in this country.

In 2008 Schuit, a.o. could still remark that the Netherlands shared, together with Cyprus, Macedonia (FYROM) and Greece a position in the rear. However, awareness grew that direct links of Dutch partial qualification systems (for instance the four level qualification framework in Dutch Secondary Vocational Education) to the EQF are not feasible and that the Netherlands have to develop a national comprehensive framework, to be subsequently linked to the EQF⁵. A new and more promising initiative was launched in 2009. In contrast to the EIM approach, this energetic initiative started at the other end of the process with the identification of the basic principles of a Dutch NLQF. Mrs. Karin van der Sanden, for this reason added to the Ministry of Education staff on a temporarily basis, suggested seven basic principles for the development of an NLQF. As these principles are (recently) accepted by the Ministry, they will be summarised in this paragraph:

1. In terms of the type of NLQF it is advised to opt for a bridging framework and not for an integrative framework. The traditional descriptors for the various subsystems to be covered in an NLQF should not be replaced by EQF descriptors (based on already existing descriptors, like the Dublin descriptors). It will be necessary to develop a common language to describe all qualifications, but for reference purposes only.
2. In terms of levels it is advised not to limit the Dutch NLQF to eight levels beforehand. Instead, the number of NQF levels should be an outcome of the developing process. Only when the number of NQF levels is decided, the consequences for the EQF reference process should be faced.
3. In terms of its regulating implications the Dutch NLQF should be non-regulatory, meaning that this NLQF should relate education subsystems and courses, but not the conditions a person should meet to move from one level to another. The use of the Dutch NLQF should be limited to compare learning outcomes in terms of levels.
4. In terms of scope it is advised to include the initial General Education, Senior Vocational and Higher Education qualifications, as well as (under conditions of objective quality assurance procedures put in place), non-formal qualifications offered by private providers.
5. The EQF levels 8,7,6 and 5 are relevant for the four levels in HE qualifications. However, it should be possible that qualifications not formally registered as HE qualifications will be

² Cedefop (2009). *Continuity, consolidation and change*. Thessaloniki: Cedefop (forthcoming).

³ H. Schuit, R. Kennis, B. Hövels (2009). *De Nederlandse competentegerichte kwalificatiestructuur gevogen*. Nijmegen: KBA

⁴ EIM (2007). *Implementatie EQF. Advies bij het voorbereiden van de implementatie van het Europees Kwalificatie Raamwerk*. Zoetermeer: EIM

⁵ The Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science in a letter to the Second Chamber of Parliament, 24th March 2009; code: BVE/stelsel/91870

admitted to these levels, although the right to issue Doctorate, Master and Bachelor titles will remain with the state accredited HE institutes exclusively.

6. A group of experts should advise on the descriptors to be used for reference purposes identified in point 1.
7. The pro and cons of the choice for of either a public of a private National Coordination Point (NCP) should be identified and discussed at Ministry level.

It will be clear that these principles to a large extent reflect the status quo in this country, except for fact that private qualifications are to be include in the NLQF. This is a new development and a potential, if not manifest, breakthrough in the Dutch education landscape. It was only very recently (July 2009) that the Education Council for the Netherlands concluded that the educational provisions for adults are many fold, but completely lack transparency due to the fact that they include both (incomparable) courses offered by public and private institutions. Because of that fact and the imbalance of quality control mechanisms between the public and private provisions, an overarching reference framework is desperately needed⁶.

Apart from the inclusion of non-formal qualifications in a national framework, the advise reflects the status quo in the Dutch initial education landscape. Suggestions made, for instance by the Education Council in 2008, to insert the EU EQF descriptors into the Secondary Vocational Education qualification framework template, or to revise the four Secondary Vocational Education levels from the new EU level descriptors perspective are not taken up⁷. It is agreed that all Secondary Vocational Education qualifications at all four Secondary Vocational Education qualification levels will be inserted into the NLQF directly and that individual assessments of each qualification separately will not be necessary⁸.

3. EQF Implementation

3.1 General information

How is your country planning to link the NQF to the EQF?

The process will start with the ranking of the formal (GE, Sec. Voc. Ed and HE) qualifications. Once the formal qualifications are firmly and undisputedly related, the non-formal qualifications, offered to be included in the NLQF, will be ranked⁹ (see figure 1).

As the Netherlands have not (yet) implemented ECVET, there are no indicators for the *specific gravity* of all qualifications, but only level indicators. This will undoubtedly turn the ranking of the non-formal qualifications to a draft NLQF with formal qualifications (for the first time!) into an very interesting process.

It is suggested that non-formal qualifications, in order to be included in the NLQF, should meet three criteria :

They have to be expressed in terms of learning outcomes

⁶ Onderwijsraad (2009) *Middelbaar en hoger onderwijs voor Volwassenen*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad

⁷ Onderwijsraad (2008) *Richtpunten bij onderwijsagenda's*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad

⁸ Het Coördinatiepunt (2009). *Niveau MBO; een analyse van niveau-aanduidingen in de kwalificatiestructuur van het mbo*. Zoetermeer: Het Coördinatiepunt

⁹ There are absolutely no indications as to how many non-formal qualifications will be offered to be ranked in the NLQF. It is expected by some that the optional entrance conditions (qualifications have to be expressed in terms of learning outcomes; learning outcomes have to be assessed formally and independently; qualifications have to be validated by an independent quality assessment body) might have a deterrent effect.

Learning outcomes at individual level have to be assessed formally and independently and have to be laid down in a certificate or diploma

Non-formal qualifications have to be validated by an independent quality assessment body.

These criteria are not yet agreed upon and still under discussion; should they be comparable, if not identical, to the criteria used in formal education or will non-formal qualifications respond to a particular set of criteria for quality?

Linked to the criteria issue is the discussion on the position and authority of the National Coordination Point (NCP). The consequence of having chosen for a bridging framework is that the procedures for the assessment of qualifications and their ranking position will remain where they are now; with the existing education sector based bodies responsible for the quality assessment of qualifications/learning outcomes. As a consequence the position of a standing NCP is mainly a formal one. Once the ranking is done in this implementation process, the role of the NCP will be to administer changes in and additions to the formal qualifications validated by these assessment bodies.

At this moment non-formal qualifications are not subjected to an independent assessment procedure; private parties can offer any course they like. As the inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the NLQF is conditional and non-formal qualifications have to be assessed by an independent body in order to include them in the NLQF register, the question is whether or not the NCP will take this role. The alternative is that the private organisations wanting to have qualifications included in the NLQF take the initiative to erect an awarding body themselves. In any case, the NCP will be formally responsible for the ranking of all qualifications. It is not yet decided which organisations will execute the ranking itself, in particular the ranking of the non-formal qualifications.

What has been (officially) decided and done already?

After having accepted the basic principles of a Dutch NLQF, Mrs. Karin van der Sanden was invited by the Ministry of Education to develop the outlines of the development process for an NLQF. This process architecture is agreed upon by the Ministry in June 2009. Although the Ministry of Education is formally responsible, it is decided to work with a set of – related – committees, divided into a decision making Steering Committee with the Directors/Heads of Department of the Secondary General, Secondary Vocational Education and Higher Education sections of the Ministry of Education, a project leader (from the Ministry of Education), an independent multi- discipline expert group and three working parties with people from the education practice. Figure 1 gives an overview:

Figure 1: the Dutch project organisation for the development of an NLQF

level	Responsibilities
The Ministry of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of an (authoritative) chair person • Chair the launching (kick off) meeting having representatives from all relevant stakeholders present • Validation of the outcomes of the process
Steering Committee (GE, HE, Sec. Voc. Ed, Agriculture HE and Sec. Voc. Ed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of interim and final products
Contact person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination on a daily basis and assessment of the process' progress
Project leader (from the Ministry of Education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeding the Ministry of Education with Draft proposals, suggestions per sector and an analysis of the acceptance

	of proposals included and having consulted all experts, the chair and stakeholders
Expert group (constitution still under discussion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development/decision on the descriptors • Development of an NLQF
Chair Expert group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading the expert group both in terms of contents and process and in close cooperation with the project leader
Working parties A) VMBO, MO 1 en 2, B) MO 3 en 4 Havo, VWO, AD, C) Bachelor, Master en Dr.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing the NLQF

At the moment this report is written, this architecture is in place and people will be invited to join the various committees and working parties, but this process is not finalised.

What is the timeframe for this process?

Figure 2 identifies the successive activities and the timeframe running from September 2009 till December 2010 :

Figure 2: the project activities and the timeframe

Month	09	10	11	12	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
1 Kick off meeting																
2 Decision on descriptors																
3 Development NLQF																
4 Testing NLQF																
5 Ranking non-formal education																
6 Reference process																
7 Decision on the NCP																
8 Communication																

Figure 2 makes it very clear that implementation activities will not start before September 2009. Yet the process has to be finalised within 16 months.

3.2 Experiences and available results

Except for the abortive and half hearted proposals in the EIM report (see paragraph 2.1), no (preliminary) findings regarding referencing national levels to EQF levels are available. Pilots are foreseen in the implementation process now agreed upon.

The reference process is scheduled between April and December 2010. It is agreed to follow the criteria and procedure guidelines issued by the European Commission. However, as some countries, for instance Ireland, have made an early start in the implementation process information and experiences will be collected from other countries and the EQF-Advisory Group to be used for the development of a procedure in this country. At this moment there is no plan yet, neither are the participants of this reference process identified and appointed.

3.3 Information related to the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF developed by the EQF Advisory Group

Until this very moment (13 October 2009) the project has not yet started and working parties are not yet operational. In terms of the template, the already accomplished activities and already taken decisions (plans/intentions) are described in section 3.1, while the expectations and conclusions of the EQF-ref project team are given in section 4. For the sake of completeness, each of the ten Referencing Criteria are addressed in the Annex of this paper.

3.4 Referencing Report

For the Netherlands, the Reference Report has to be written still

3.5 Organisation of the process for preparing the referencing report

The process for preparing the referencing report still has to start and it has not yet been decided as to how this process will be organised.

4. The EQF-ref project team's expectations and conclusions

Expectations

A major point for discussion when developing a NLQF is its number of levels. It will be clear that the EQF range from 8 to 1 defines the ends of the continuum; NLQF levels will not be defined above level 8 or below level 1. Furthermore, It is not disputed that HE qualifications will be placed at levels 8 – 5. It is neither disputed that the integral four level Secondary Vocational Education qualification framework is going to be inserted into the NLQF. But if we add the four levels in HE, the four levels in Secondary Vocational Education and the four levels of Junior Vocational and General Education the NLQF will have a minimum of 12 levels (see the appendix).

It will be clear that the discussion will concentrate on the position of level 5 and level 2. Is level 5 going to be exclusively reserved for short courses provided by HE institutes, or will it be possible to rank top level Secondary Vocational Education qualifications at this level as well? And are level 1 and 2 reserved for the lower levels of Senior General GE/top levels of junior vocational and general education, or will level 2 be shared with Senior Secondary Vocational Education?

Until now Dutch stakeholders in Secondary Vocational Education are not yet willing to implement the EU ECVET credit point system at sector level. The feeling is that the decision for implementation should be left to the individual school boards. An important argument is that Secondary Vocational Education is – at least until 2010 - more that fully engaged in the transformation process leading to competence based qualifications *and* programmes for all sectors and at all levels. The introduction of another initiative on top of that would be too much and complicate matters. It will be clear that, in order to assess the *specific gravity* of formal versus non-formal qualifications ECVET units will be very helpful.

Conclusions

Discussions so far focuses on internal issues and (status) debates between HE, Secondary Vocational Education and GE stakeholders in terms of level claims. It should be interesting to follow the process in other countries in the next 16 months, for instance through this project, in particular with regard to the choices made at level 5 and 2. Implications of decisions made for these levels in this country will have a significant impact on the figures for the Netherlands in European statistics in the future.

And finally , a more general point is the question whether or not procedures for linking international sector based qualifications to the EQF directly and procedures for linking sector based qualifications to the EQF via the NQF route will lead to identical outcomes. Should international qualifications already related to the EQF be assessed again to be included in NQFs? In other words, what is the position of a National Coordination Point with regard to the application of National quality criteria for the inclusion of these qualifications in a NQF?

Utrecht, 26 August / 13 October 2009

Annex I : Questions about 10 criteria/procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory group

Criterion 1

The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? ***This is really not to say because there are as many arguments to limit the role of the NCP to an administrative one as well as to give it some authority to validate (non formal) qualifications***
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? ***In the Netherlands each education sector has its own national representing bodies, politic networks and an 'own' Department within the Ministry of Education; they are – up to a point – parallel universes. It is very much the question whether or not an NCP will be the catalyst for the production of an integrated and interdependent multilevel set of qualifications, even more so as non formal qualifications are going to be included in the NLQF***

Criterion 2

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? ***This will be the outcome of a negotiation process that will take into account the level descriptors as much as the interests of the various education sectors . This process has not started yet, also because some sectors (HE in particular) are very reluctant to get themselves engaged***
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? ***No explicit thoughts on the subject***

Criterion 3

The national qualifications framework or system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? ***Only at the level of education subsystems (secondary vocational education)***
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? ***This is the implication for all education subsystems to be included in the NLQF as a necessary condition for the creation of a transparent NQF. However, at this moment, not all stakeholders agree on the consequences this criterion will have for 'their' sector***
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? ***This is the implication for all education subsystems to be included in the NLQF as a necessary condition for the creation of a transparent NQF***

Criterion 4

The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **Only at the level of education subsystems (secondary vocational education and higher professional education)**
 - If yes: What kind of experiences? Are there any documents available? **For secondary vocational education a template with level specific criteria is available (in Dutch)**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **The authority for the execution of these procedures has to be divided between the current sector based set of stakeholders or will be given to the NCP. The first option is most likely**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **The creation of a NCP as an independent authority, but this most unlikely**

Criterion 5

The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer (s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation).

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **This consistency will not be a problem; it is agreed to follow the criteria and procedure guidelines issued by the European Commission**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **Most likely is that all sectors covered by the NLQF will include the EU criteria in their sector based quality assurance systems**

Criterion 6

The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **This criterion will most likely met via the bodies and working groups identified in the project organisation for the development of an NLQF; see figure 1 in this report**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **The chosen procedure is almost standard in this country and will therefore appeal to all stakeholders involved**

Criterion 7

The referencing process shall involve international experts.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **The working groups (see figure 1: the Dutch project organisation for the development of an NLQF in this report) do not foresee in the inclusion of international experts. The only reference made to international expertise is the intention to look into experience of Ireland (and possibly other countries as well) concerning the implementation process:**

- What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **The chosen procedure is almost standard in this country and will therefore appeal to all stakeholders involved**

Criterion 8

The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **Yes**
 - If yes, what are the plans or intentions how to interpret and fulfil this criterion? **Via the project organisation designed for the development of an NLQF; see figure 1 in this report. It is agreed to follow the criteria and procedure guidelines issued by the European Commission**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **The chosen project organisation is almost standard in this country and will therefore appeal to all stakeholders involved**

Criterion 9

The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.

- Please see the prototype version of the EQF web platform from CEDEFOP - Referencing National Qualifications to the EQF: <http://www.eqf-reference-nqf.net/>
- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **Most probably via the Dutch Ministry of Education**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **No explicit thoughts on the subject**

Criterion 10

Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.

- Are there already any experiences in your country how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
- Have you/has your country already (officially) decided how to fulfil this criterion? **No**
 - If no, what are your expectations how this criterion will (probably) be addressed in your country? **Either by the NCP or by the respective sector based bodies, most likely by the latter**
- Independently of what has (or has not) been decided in your country:
 - What do you think would be a good idea how to interpret and address this criterion? **An obvious choice would be to invest the NCP with this authority but, again, this is a most unlikely outcome**

Criterion 1-10

- Do you agree with this set of criteria? **Yes**
- Is something missing/not relevant/not applicable? **No**

Appendix 2 : the levels of some Dutch school types

Higher education

- Doctorate
- Master Degree
- Bachelor Degree
- Associate Degree (not fully implemented yet)

Secondary Vocational Education

- Level 4: middle management & specialist
- Level 3: full professional
- Level 2: basic vocational
- Level 1: assistant level

Junior General and prevocational Education

- General education track
- Mixed general and vocational track
- Vocational track
- Basic vocational track