

Development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE) in Poland

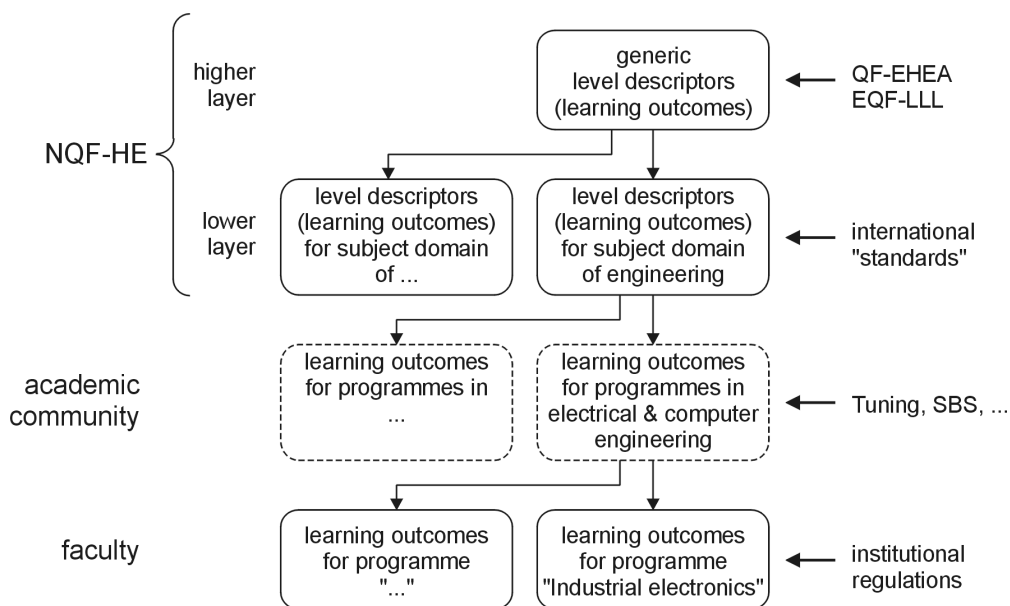
The new regulations adopted in 2011 (amendment to the *Law on Higher Education*, followed by lower-level legal acts – ministerial regulations, including the *Ordinance on the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education*) have reoriented the HE system towards learning outcomes and have formally introduced the NQF-HE.

According to the amended Law, all degree and non-degree programmes offered by HEIs in academic year 2012/13 and later must comply with all the regulations relating to NQF-HE. In particular, learning outcomes for all the programmes (first, second, and third cycle programmes, but also non-degree post-graduate programmes) and other forms of education leading to any diploma or certificate, offered by HEIs, are to be defined and verification procedures, intended to check whether the intended learning outcomes have been achieved by the students, are to be devised and implemented. Programmes will be accredited according to the new rules and procedures that focus on the learning outcomes verification procedures.

A characteristic feature of the Polish NQF-HE is a two-layer hierarchy of level descriptors defined by law for the first level (Bachelor) and second level (Master) qualifications. At the higher layer, the generic level descriptors corresponding to the Bachelor and Master degrees are defined, whereas at the lower layer the level descriptors more precisely characterise qualifications in eight large subject domains (the selection of these eight subject domains has been based to a large extent on the OECD/EUROSTAT/UNESCO science and technology classification) and two profiles. Each degree programme offered by a higher education institution must have a profile (i.e. be either academically or practically oriented) and must be assigned to one or more of the eight subject domains (i.e. the intended learning outcomes for the programmes must comply with the level descriptors for the relevant subject domain or – in case of interdisciplinary programmes spanning two or more domains – with appropriate combination of descriptors from the relevant domains).

These regulations look somewhat restrictive but in fact they have brought a much needed academic autonomy to HEIs – they have lifted the existing constraints which allowed an institution to offer a degree programme only in one of 118 fields of study with contents partially regulated at the national level.

The hierarchy of learning outcomes related to the Polish NQF-HE is illustrated below. An intermediate layer of learning outcomes, set between the NQF-HE level descriptors and intended learning outcomes defined by HEIs for specific degree programmes represents the results of possible academic community initiatives. For example, the deans or other representatives of faculties of research-oriented universities of technology offering programmes in electrical and computer engineering can define a subset of intended learning outcomes common to all programmes in the area (such initiatives should, however, not lead to the imposition of “standards” that would preclude the much needed differentiation of programmes at national level).



source: A. Krasniewski, "Development of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Poland", *Journal of the European Higher Education Area*, 1/2012, pp. 19-48.

In parallel with the last phase of the NQF-HE design (drafting of new regulations) and afterwards, unprecedented efforts were made to prepare the academic community for the successful implementation of the framework at institutional level (and also to get much needed feedback for refining the draft regulations). In particular, the following actions were taken (most of these activities were financed, at least in part, by the European Social Fund):

- A dedicated NQF-HE web site, easily accessible from the home site of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, was created.
- A handbook introducing the concept of qualifications frameworks, describing the basic solutions adopted in the Polish NQF-HE and presenting the learning outcome based approach to design of curricula and individual modules was published in late 2010 (6000 printed copies + on-line availability). Another handbook was written and distributed in late 2011, with explanations and comments on the legal regulations and guidelines for HEIs, faculties and individual members of academic staff.
- A comprehensive consultation, information and training campaign was jointly organised by the Ministry and the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (this Foundation is responsible for the coordination of activities of the Polish team of Bologna Experts). Many conferences, seminars, workshops and other events took place in almost all academic centres around the country (from September 2010 to June 2011, preceding the formal introduction of the NQF-HE, more than 100 events were organised, with an estimated participation of ca. 16,000 academic and administrative staff).
- As a means of promoting the implementation of NQF-HE at HEIs in the context of the development of quality culture, a special fund was set up in the HE budget for 2012. It will be used to award – on a competitive basis – sizable grants to faculties that have successfully introduced innovations into NQF-HE implementation and into the enhancement of their internal quality assurance systems in line with the new learning outcomes approach. The first group of winners will be announced in November 2012.

The Polish NQF-HE is an integrated part (a sub-framework) of the comprehensive national framework – the Polish Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (PQF-LLL), which also includes the sub-frameworks for general education and for vocational education and training.

Andrzej Krasniewski