

# THE FLEMISH QUALIFICATIONS STRUCTURE

Developed

Approved

Implemented

*December 2012*

Flemish government



**aKOV**  
Agency for  
Quality Assurance  
in Education  
and Training

# INTRODUCTION

The Flemish qualifications structure was developed in the period from 2005 until 2009. In 2005 a consultation was organised among the Flemish stakeholders about the added value and the potential implementation of the European Qualifications Framework. The results of this consultation were integrated in the conceptual development process, which led to the Flemish qualifications structure.

The Flemish qualifications structure was approved and enshrined in a Flemish Parliament Act on 30 April 2009. The necessary amendments to be able to effectively implement the Flemish Parliament Act were ratified on 30 Augustus 2011.

The implementation of the Flemish qualifications structure took place in the spring of 2012. To this end the procedures leading to recognised qualifications needed to be mapped. In October 2011 the Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (hereinafter AKOV) launched a carefully monitored pilot phase to operationalize the procedure leading to recognised professional qualifications. This pilot phase was successfully completed in March 2012. The outcome consisted of five professional qualifications. Meanwhile AKOV has also set up a pilot project for elaborating the procedure(s) for recognised educational qualification levels 1 through 4 and level 5. The implementation decision for professional qualifications and for educational qualifications will be in force in 2013. The implementation decision for educational qualifications level 1-4 will be developed in 2012.

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## (1) European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

### - *Backgrounds and objectives*

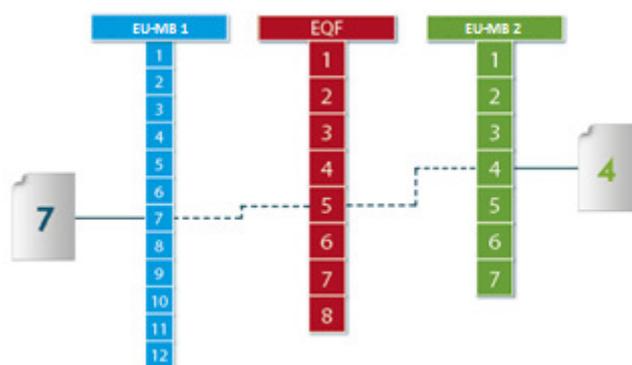
The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) follows from a series of international developments, including among others the Kopenhagen Declaration on the creation of a European space for higher education. In 2008 the EQF was enshrined in a European recommendation.

The EQF has two important objectives:

- the promotion of the international mobility of students and workers;
- the promotion of lifelong learning.

### - *Structure*

The EQF is a common European reference framework, comprising eight levels, which links the qualification frameworks of EU Member States. The European qualifications framework is considered a meta framework for the European Member States because it serves as a common reference. The EQF operates like a translation tool to make the various qualifications of the Member States 'legible', its objective is not to merge the various national frameworks.



Every EU Member State draws up an overview of all the possible qualifications an individual can obtain based on its own framework. All the qualifications are then incorporated in a hierarchical structure, which allows for a mutual comparison throughout the entire European Union. This promotes the internal mobility of EU citizens. In other words, the aim is to make it easier for EU citizens to work in another EU Member States or to start (continue) their studies there more easily.

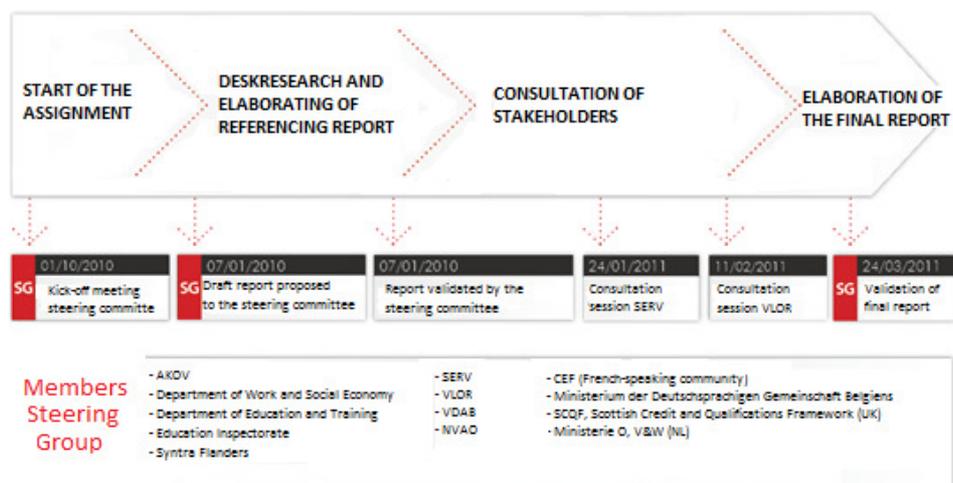
## (2) Referencing Report

The European Parliament has recommended that EU Member States reference their national qualifications framework with the European Reference Framework by 2010 so that it can really operate as a meta framework. The European Union proposed to appoint a national coordination point to support this process. In Flanders the *Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV)* serves as the national coordination point EQF.

AKOV has four tasks as NCP-EQF:

1. To reference and link the Flemish qualifications framework with the European Qualifications Framework. AKOV drew up an extensive referencing report in this frame.
2. To use a clear method to reference and link the Flemish Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework. The guideline for this is a list of ten criteria which were supplied by the European Commission.
3. To provide information about this link, also at European level.
4. To encourage all the interest groups to start working with this qualifications structure in the future.

In 2010-2011 AKOV established the link between both frameworks for Flanders. The elaboration of the referencing report required several phases.



The first version of the Referencing Report was successfully submitted to the EQF-Advisory Group at the end of May 2011. This group is made up of representatives of the Member States and other stakeholders. The report will continuously monitor the developments in the Flemish education and training field, which is continuously changing. A new chapter was added where the operationalization and implementation of the Flemish Qualification Structure was presented. You can always find the most recent version of the Referencing Report on the FQS (Flanders Qualifications Structure) website.

### (3) Flemish Qualifications Structure (FQS)

#### - Background and objectives

Lifelong learning is necessary to cope with the fast pace of technological, economic and social developments. To this end many people are already attending training courses organised by VDAB (Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Agency) or SYNTRA or obtaining certificates in the frame of a company-wide traineeship, which is organised by a sectoral fund. Others obtain an *Ervaringsbewijs* (Certificate of Experience) or go the *EVC (Erkenning van Verworven Competenties, Recognition of Acquired Competences)* route for the certification of their (professional) experience. All these certificates, diplomas, etc. are also called qualification certificates.

The Government of Flanders started drawing up the Flemish qualifications structure to determine the precise value of each of these qualification certificates. This framework raises the profile and visibility of the recognised qualification certificates, which can be obtained in education or on the labour market and also facilitates the transition from one to the other.

The added value of the Flemish qualifications structure is translated in several ways:

- FQS is an overarching classification of recognised qualifications;
- FQS makes the content of qualifications and their mutual relationships clearer;
- FQS enhances communication on qualifications between education and training providers and the labour market;
- FQS consolidates the potential for exchanges between various learning systems.

#### - Structure

All the recognised qualifications are systematically collected and classified in the Flemish qualifications structure. This is done based on a framework, the Flemish qualifications framework. This framework consists of eight levels. Each level within the framework is generically described by means of five descriptor elements: knowledge, skills, context, autonomy and responsibility. Level 5 is explained in more detail using the descriptors in the illustration below.

	<i>Knowledge / Skills</i>	<i>Context / Autonomy / Responsibility</i>
<b>Level 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ expanding the information in a specific area with concrete and abstract data, or completing it with missing data; using conceptual frameworks; being aware of the scope of subject-specific knowledge</li> <li>➤ applying integrated cognitive and motorical skills</li> <li>➤ transferring knowledge and applying procedures flexibly and inventively for the performance of tasks for the strategic solution of concrete and abstract problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ acting in a range of new, complex contexts</li> <li>➤ functioning autonomously with initiative</li> <li>➤ taking responsibility for the achievement of personal outcomes and the stimulation of collective results</li> </ul>

The Flemish qualifications structure distinguishes between professional qualifications and educational qualifications.

A **professional qualification** gives an overview of the competences with which a profession can be exercised. A professional qualification can be obtained through education, training or the certification of one's practical experience. It is *'a complete and classified set of competences with which a profession can be exercised'*.

A professional qualification has the following characteristics:

- A professional qualification represents the required competences of a full-fledged professional practitioner.
- A professional qualification highlights the required current competences, not the future competences.
- A professional qualification highlights the required competences, irrespective of the individual's position or status (worker, employee, self-employed). As a consequence contractual relations are not included in a professional qualification.
- A professional qualification is uniformly defined for a given profession. This profession can be intersectoral or sector-specific.
- A professional qualification is single because combined qualifications are difficult to classify.

An **educational qualification** is *'a complete and classified set of competences which are necessary to function and participate in society, with which further studies in secondary or higher education can be undertaken or professional activities can be performed'*. Educational qualifications are exclusively issued by educational institutions.

Depending on the educational level and the form of education, educational qualifications may consist of one or more professional qualifications, final objectives and/or specific final objectives.

Professional qualifications and educational qualifications are possible at all eight levels of the qualifications framework.

Qualification level	Professional qualifications	Educational qualifications
8	x	Doctor
7	x	Master
6	x	Bachelor
5	x	One or more level 5 recognised professional qualifications
4	x	<p>A. Final objectives of 3rd stage of general secondary education and specific final objectives general secondary education</p> <p>B. Final objectives of 3rd stage of technical secondary education and specific final objectives 3rd stage of technical secondary education</p> <p>C. Final objectives of 3rd stage of artistic secondary education and specific final objectives 4rd stage of artistic secondary education</p> <p>D. Final objectives of 3rd stage of technical secondary education or artistic secondary education and recognised professional qualification(s)</p> <p>E. Final objectives of 3rd year of the 3rd stage of secondary vocational education and recognised professional qualification(s)</p> <p>F. Final objectives supplementary general adult education and recognised professional qualification(s)</p> <p>G. Recognised level 4 professional qualification(s)</p> <p>H. Final objectives and specific final objectives as stipulated in a., b. or c. and one or more recognised professional qualifications</p>
3	x	Final objectives 2nd year of the 3rd stage of secondary vocational education and recognised professional qualification(s)
2	x	<p>- Final objectives adult basic education</p> <p>- Final objectives 2nd stage of secondary vocational education and recognised professional qualification(s)</p>
1	x	Final objectives primary education

## **(1) Flemish Parliament Act**

The Flemish qualifications framework was enshrined in the Flemish Act on the qualifications structure of 30 April 2009.

## **(2) Amendment**

In the course of 2010 and 2012 a suitable answer was formulated to a number of issues in the Flemish Parliament Act, after finding a consensus with all the stakeholders. On 25 January 2011, the representatives of the policy areas of Education and Labour, presided by the Ministers for Education and Labour, arrived at an agreement for the further implementation of the Flemish Act on the qualifications structure of 30 April 2009.

The necessary amendments were added to the Flemish Parliament Act on 30 August 2011. This provided the impetus for the effective implementation of the Flemish Qualifications Structure.

## **(3) Implementing decision**

The implementing decision operationalizes the procedures for recognised professional qualification and recognised educational qualification (Se-n-Se and HBO). It will be in force in 2013. The implementation decision for educational qualifications level 1-4 will be developed in 2013.

## (1) Operationalization of the procedure for recognized professional qualification

The Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training launched a pilot phase to operationalize the procedure for recognised professional qualification in autumn 2011. The objective was twofold: *“A number of dossiers will go through the various phases leading to a qualification based on the priorities of the two policy areas. As far as the classification is concerned AKOV will go in search of a scientifically-based classification method which is acceptable for all the partners.”*

A working group with representatives from the various entities involved (policy area Education and policy area Labour) met monthly to direct the pilot phase.

The task of the working group was threefold:

- Facilitate: Prepare and develop the procedure for recognised professional qualification.
- Monitor: Follow up the first run-through of the procedure, reporting and adapting where necessary.
- Assess: Drawing up an overall final evaluation of the initial run-through of the procedure and formulating recommendations.

The pilot phase lasted six months; from early September 2011 until the end of February 2012. During this pilot phase the procedure for a recognised professional qualification was simultaneously developed and applied to eight pilot cases. Of the eight pilot cases five cases ('dispatcher', 'warehouse worker', 'residential electro-technical installer', 'dental assistant' and 'store manager') were subsequently validated, classified and recognised as professional qualification.

- Procedure leading to a recognised professional qualification



What is validation?

Validating is checking whether the set of competences included in the dossier enables an individual to exercise a given profession and whether the set of competences is relevant for the labour market, has social or cultural relevance.

Who validates?

Professional qualification dossiers with labour market relevance: The validation commission is made up of two representatives of the interprofessional social partners and two representatives of VDAB/SYNTRA Flanders, based on their labour market management function.

The Commission shall be chaired by an independent president. AKOV will serve as the secretary of the commission.



What is classification?

Classification consists of attributing a level of the Flemish qualifications structure to a professional qualification dossier according to a method that was developed to this end.

Who classifies the qualification dossiers?

Professional qualification dossiers with labour market relevance: the classification commission is composed of seven representatives of SERV (Flanders' Social and Economic Council), five representatives of VLOR (the Flemish Education Council) and two representatives of VDAB (Flemish Public Employment and Vocational Training Service)/SYNTRA Flanders (Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training) based on their stakeholder function.

The Commission shall be chaired by an independent president. AKOV will serve as the secretary of the commission.



What is recognition?

Recognising a professional qualification based on the results of the validation, classification and review of the entire process (elaborating a professional qualification dossier, validation and classification).

Who recognises?

The Government of Flanders



What is registering?

The professional qualifications are incorporated in a database.

Who registers?

AKOV

These pilot phase has facilitated the clarification of the procedural lines and the associated operational principles. The entire procedure has been written out in a scenario. The scenario describes the workflow for every phase and the associated criteria, documents and tools. Every year we plan an evaluation by the end of the year, with a view to adjusting the procedure where applicable.

Below is an overview of the key principles per procedural step.

- [Elaborating a professional qualification dossier](#)

Every year the education and labour partners draw up a joint list of priorities which determines which dossiers can be started up. The list of priorities is drawn up based on the criteria developed to this including the need for qualifications in the labour market and in education, the option of varying inflow and of learning ladders, the availability of reference frameworks and the option of clustering,...

One or more reference framework(s) are used to elaborate a professional qualification dossier. The sheets in the Competent database are the primary reference framework. Competent is an IT-based system (database) in which the professional activities are listed by professional cluster. If the Competent sheets are incomplete other sources can be used (federal and Flemish regulation, European reference frameworks, etc.).

The professional qualification dossier template was elaborated in close interaction with the classification method. It comprises five parts:

- Global information (title, definition, sectors and stakeholders)
- Description of the competence based on the descriptor elements
- Labour market relevance / societal relevance based on factual data
- Coordination with another/other (potential) professional qualification dossier(s)
- Updates with an indication of the durability of the professional qualification dossier

The starting point for drawing up a dossier is that the authors take the initiative and write out the professional qualification dossiers as well as having final responsibility for them. They define the boundaries of the dossiers and the selection of relevant skills per dossier. There is a difference between the main authors and the co-authors although both provide the necessary support for a professional qualification dossier.

- The main authors of a dossier are the “clients” on the labour market or in civil society (e.g., sectoral federations, training funds, umbrella organisations, etc.). The main authors write out the dossier or play an active role in it. In principle education and training providers are not the main authors of this dossier, nor are they co-authors.

- The co-authors of a dossier play a supporting role in drawing up the dossier (e.g., reread it, supply labour market data). VDAB and Syntra Flanders in principle are co-authors of a dossier (with the exception of entrepreneurial professional qualifications for which Syntra Flanders can be the main author).

The working process to arrive at a professional qualification dossier consists of 2 phases:

- (1) AKOV organises general information sessions in which information is provided about the recognised professional qualification procedure. After all the parties elaborating a professional qualification dossier should have a basic understanding of the structure and principles of the Flemish qualifications structure (level descriptors, descriptor elements, etc.). During this information session the parties elaborating the dossier also learn about the manual and the template of the professional qualification dossier and guidelines are given about how to elaborate a professional qualification dossier. Once they have attended this information session they can start to elaborate a professional qualification dossier.
- (2) An AKOV process manager is allocated per discipline/professional cluster. If the authors of the dossier have questions during this process they can contact their process manager by mail or by phone. Follow-up meetings are also organised to monitor and support the operational process.

The process manager provides support (specifically when it comes to describing the skills per descriptor element) and assures the quality. AKOV can assure the quality from the start, during the elaboration process, because of the (continuous) feedback to and follow-up by the process manager. This is done among others during the follow-up meetings which afford authors the opportunity to put all their questions to the process manager.

A manual for the elaboration of a dossier was put together to help stakeholders elaborate a qualitative dossier. A qualitative dossier is the prerequisite for completing the rest of the procedure without problems. The manual's objective is to guarantee that the dossier and the classification method are harmonized. A questionnaire was developed to describe the descriptor elements (mainly context, autonomy and accountability). The questionnaire asks about the desired information in a targeted way.

AKOV's process managers can also rely on guidelines about how to approach this process management, next to the manual. During their training they learn about the procedure for recognised professional qualification, the manual for elaborating a professional qualification dossier and the process management guidelines.

In order to manage the dossier flow we work with deadlines for submitting the dossiers. We stimulate the joint elaboration and submission of dossiers which belong to the same professional clusters because this facilitates the work of the validation and classification committee.

### • [Validation](#)

Based on fixed dates of submission an annual fixed meeting calendar is drawn up for the validation commission.

The members of the validation commission based themselves on criteria which are operationalized in indicators that can be evaluated. One of the criteria for example is *'There is sufficient support for the content of the professional qualification dossier'*. This criterion has three indicators: 1. When effectively elaborating the professional qualification dossier the relevant stakeholders (where necessary from different sectors) are structurally involved, 2. A sufficient number of relevant stakeholders (where necessary from different sectors) jointly submitted the professional qualification dossier and 3. The content of the professional qualification dossier has the support of a sufficient number of relevant stakeholders (where necessary from different sectors).

The validation decision in principle is taken in consensus. If the members of the validation commission do not validate the dossier the argumentation for this is included in the validation decision. The authors submitting the dossier are informed of the validation decision and can amend and re-submit the dossier based on the comments of the members of the validation commission.

### • [Classification](#)

The Flemish Act on the qualifications structure requires a *'scientifically calibrated method for classification which leads to a consensus to determine the level of a qualification'*.

Based on an analysis of the Flemish qualification framework (8 elements) and the descriptor elements (5 elements) a matrix was developed whereby 8 elements (knowledge, cognitive skills, problem-solving skills, motor skills, operational context, environmental context, autonomy and responsibility) were evaluated on a 15-point scale (A-, A, A+, B-,B,B+,C-,C,C+,D-,D,D+,E-,E,E+).

The classification method comprises a qualitative and quantitative part:

- Qualitative:  
In a first phase the classification committee reaches a consensus about the qualitative classification levels based on scores per descriptor element according to a manual based on decision trees and definitions per descriptor element.
- Quantitative:  
After the classification commission has arrived at a consensus and determined a qualitative classification per descriptor element the obtained score will be inputted in a weighting tool for every descriptor element. The qualitative classification is thus converted into a quantitative classification.

The scientific value of the classification method was assessed by two independent scientific experts. The points for attention and the recommendations of the experts were incorporated in the elaboration of the classification method.

A number of classification guidelines were formulated for an efficient operation of the classification commission:

- Following a two-day training to learn to work with the classification method is a condition for becoming a member of the classification committee.
- Because of inter-assessor-reliability every member has to prepare the classification prior to the meeting of the classification committee, based on the classification method and the professional qualification dossiers for consideration.
- Every member of the classification committee is an classification expert. He/she will not act as a representative of his/her organisation or defend the point of view of his/her rank and file.
- The classification is based on the content of the professional qualification dossier. Free interpretations based on general background knowledge and/or casuistry are not a valid basis for classification.
- The members of the classification commission have to develop a sense of ethics. A stable group of classification experts is necessary for this.

#### • Marginal review

AKOV will review the entire elaboration process of the professional qualification dossier including its classification. *‘A marginal review is a quality control technique whereby content requirements and the reasonableness of the evaluated process and its outcome are reviewed. This marginal review entails that AKOV does not take the place of the authors submitting the professional qualification dossier, nor does it redo the commission’s classification work. It does mean however that AKOV will check whether all the form requirements have been met and whether the process was reasonable and whether the outcome is not manifestly unreasonable.’* AKOV will base itself on a list of criteria to carry out the marginal review.

#### • Recognize

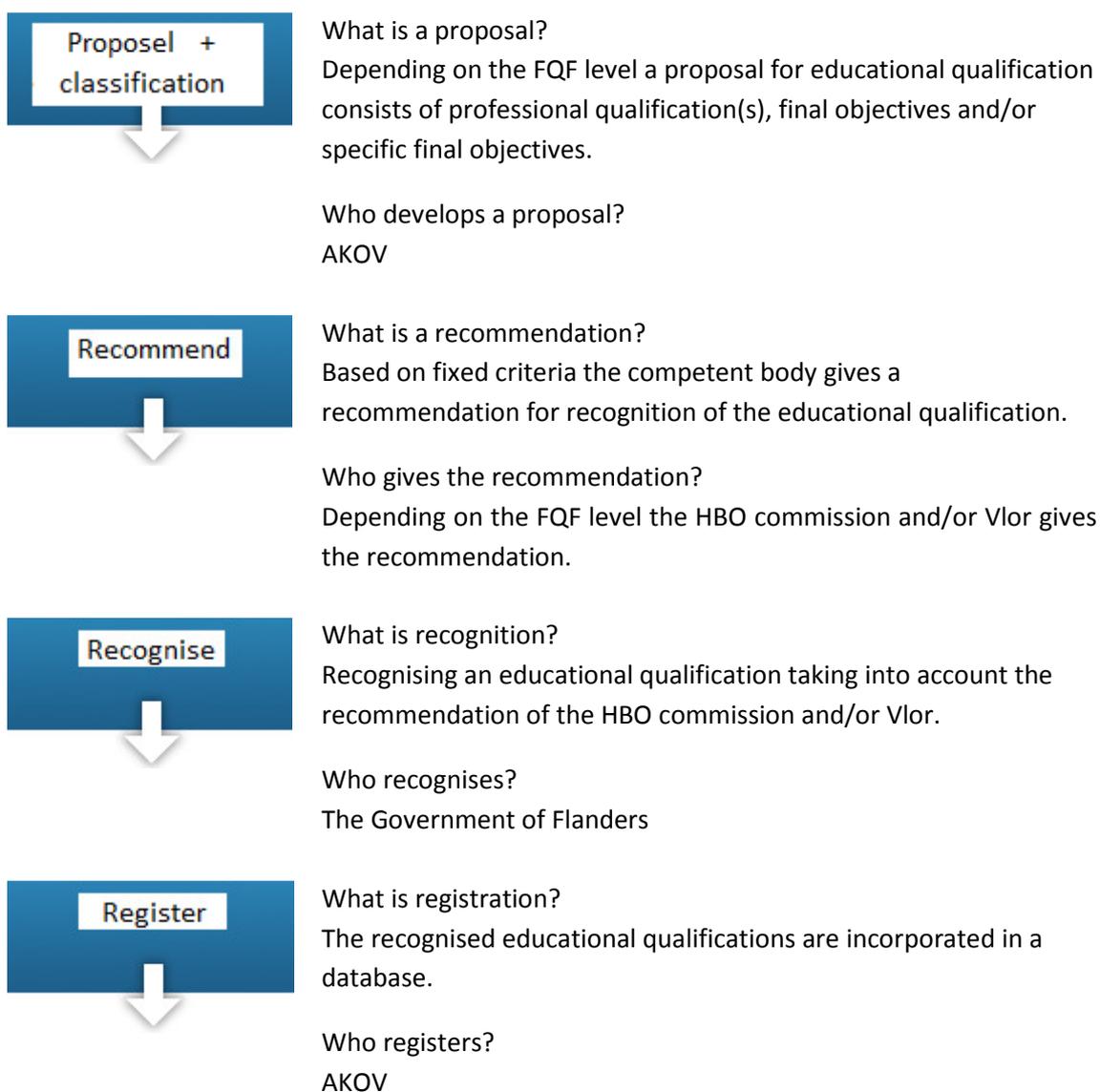
AKOV will then draw up a recommendation regarding recognition for the Government of Flanders after it has validated and classified a professional qualification dossier. Such a recommendation consists of a professional qualification (title and definition, level, year, competences) and four annexes: the professional qualification dossier, the validation decision, the classification recommendation and the outcome of the marginal review.

## (2) Operationalization of the procedure for recognized educational qualification

Flanders distinguishes between the procedure to arrive at educational qualifications of level 1-5 and the procedure for educational qualifications of level 6-8.

- Educational qualifications level 1 - 5

Below you will find an overview of the complete procedure leading to recognised educational qualification level 1 through 5, which like the procedure leading to a recognised professional qualification, consists of several phases.



AKOV elaborates a recommendation and/or proposal of educational qualification on its own initiative or at the request of any stakeholder. Every proposal of educational qualification consists of:

- general information (title, level, ...)
- a list of the final objectives, specific final objectives levels and/or skills of one or more recognised professional qualifications (depending on the FQF level).
- the qualification level
- the application of the criteria as listed in the Flemish Act on the qualifications structure.
  - social, economic or cultural need;
  - the educational and pedagogical context: adapted to the target group, the profile of the type and level of education, stimulation of learning motivation;
  - the expected inflow and outflow;
  - the available material and financial resources and expertise;
  - the possibility of collaboration with other institutions or the labour market/the world of business, if required;
  - continuity in studies and career: coordination with the existing educational offer, coordination with follow-up courses and/or employment opportunities.
- The relation with other proposals for educational qualifications and with recognised professional and educational qualifications.

These pilot phase has facilitated the clarification of the procedural lines and the associated operational principles. The entire procedure has been written out in a scenario. The scenario describes the workflow for every phase and the associated criteria, documents and tools.

- Educational qualifications level 6 - 8

A qualification in higher education refers to the learning outcomes of the completed education for the bachelor's and master's degrees and to a discipline for the degree of doctor. There is a direct link between the Flemish qualifications structure and the educational structure of higher education.



What is a description?

The area-specific learning outcomes which every graduate needs to have need to be described for every training.

Who describes these learning outcomes?

The higher education institutions coordinated by VLIR (the Flemish Interuniversity Council) and VLHORA (the Flemish Council for Non-University Higher Education).



What is an classification?

The area-specific learning outcomes of the bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees are automatically incorporated as qualifications of respectively levels 6, 7 and 8.

Who classifies the qualification dossiers?

The higher education institutions coordinated by VLIR and VLHORA.



What is recognition?

The area-specific learning outcomes shall automatically be recognised as qualifications.

Who recognises?

Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO)



What is registration?

The recognised educational qualifications are incorporated in a database.

Who registers?

AKOV

### (3) Role of AKOV

The Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV) is the competent department of the Government of Flanders and is responsible for the roll-out and quality assurance of the Flemish qualifications structure.

- Process management during the elaboration of professional qualification dossiers

AKOV is in charge of process management during the elaboration of professional qualification dossiers. The authors take the initiative and write out the professional qualification dossiers as well as having final responsibility for them. They define the boundaries of the professional qualification dossiers and the selection of relevant skills for every professional qualification dossier. The process manager provides support (specifically when it comes to describing the skills per descriptor element) and assures the quality.

- Coordination/quality assurance of the procedure for recognised professional and educational qualifications

AKOV coordinates the procedure and work process leading to recognised professional and educational qualifications. With the exception of the higher education qualifications for which NVAO is competent AKOV is responsible for the quality assurance of the Flemish qualifications structure. The agency will check whether all the requirements regarding the form of the procedures and documents have been met and whether the process was reasonable and whether the outcome is not manifestly unreasonable.

- Qualifications database

AKOV registers and communicates the recognised professional and educational qualifications. To this end a database is developed in which the certified qualifications are gathered and classified. This database promotes the transparency and comparability of the qualifications issued by the education and training providers.

## More information?

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/kwalificatiestructuur/>