

SWITZERLAND

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

While Swiss education and training is generally considered to be of high quality, many of its qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, potentially hindering Swiss citizens seeking employment abroad. Switzerland sees the link to European qualifications frameworks – both the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) – as an opportunity to strengthen the transparency and comparability of its national qualifications in a European and wider international context. In 2009 Switzerland adopted a national qualifications framework for higher education – *Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich* (NQR-CH-HS/NQF-HE) ⁽¹⁾ – in line with the Bologna-process. A NQF for vocational and professional qualifications – *Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung* (NQR-CH-BB/NQF-VPET) ⁽²⁾ – was adopted on 27 August 2014 ⁽³⁾ and put in force from 1 October 2014 ⁽⁴⁾. This latter framework is explicitly oriented to the EQF and introduces an eight-level structure defined through knowledge, skills and competence. The framework was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2015). The NQF-VPET can be considered to have reached operational stage, given that a significant proportion of existing vocational and professional qualifications, have been included.

⁽¹⁾ Information on the NQF for higher education can be found at:
<https://www.swissuniversities.ch/en/higher-education-area/qualifications-framework-nqfch-hs/> [accessed 5.12.2016].

⁽²⁾ Also referred to in English as NQF-VPET.

⁽³⁾ Government of Switzerland (2014). *Verordnung über den nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung V-NQR-BB [Regulation on the NQF for VET qualifications]*. <http://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/index.html>

⁽⁴⁾ Information on the adoption of the framework can be found at:
<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/de/home/themen/berufsbildung/nqr.html>

Policy objectives

The proposal for the Swiss national qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training (NQF-VPET) (*Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung – NQR-CH-BB*) was presented in February 2012. The framework consists of eight learning-outcomes-based levels described through knowledge, skills and competence, as in the EQF. The main objectives of the framework are:

- (a) to increase the national and international transparency and comparability of Swiss vocational and professional qualifications;
- (b) to express the high value attributed to Swiss vocational and professional education and training;
- (c) to strengthen, as part of an overall strategy, the recognition of Swiss higher vocational and professional education and training;
- (d) to contribute to parity of esteem between vocational and academic education and training;
- (e) to improve the opportunities for Swiss-educated professionals to get jobs abroad and so increase overall mobility.

Including all levels of qualification, the framework could potentially be seen as a forerunner of a comprehensive NQF, linking up with the qualifications framework for higher education and covering all types of qualification. This will require political discussion and there are currently no signals in this direction. The recent reorganisations at ministerial level, bringing the responsible departments closer together, could provide a closer link between the NQF-VPET and the NQF-HE.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The shift to learning outcomes has been fundamental to reforming Swiss vocational and professional qualifications in recent years. This work has led to the gradual development of methods for writing learning outcomes ⁽⁵⁾. The use of

⁽⁵⁾ For information on the method for writing learning outcomes, and for examples of profiles, consult:
<http://www.bbt.admin.ch/themen/hoehere/00160/index.html?lang=de> [accessed 5.12.2016].

learning outcomes for general and higher education is more limited but can be observed in these areas as well.

The level descriptors of the NQF-VPET reflect the competence approach already in use in Swiss vocational and professional education and training. The main elements of the descriptors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. **The main elements of the descriptors in Swiss NQF**

Knowledge	Declarative knowledge	
	Understanding	
Skills	Procedural skills	
	Sensorimotoric skills	
Competences	Professional competence	
	Personal competence	Self-competence
		Social competence
		Leadership competence

It is emphasised that the descriptors are defined specifically in relation to Swiss vocational and professional education and training (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2015). ‘Knowledge’ relates to factual knowledge in a field of work or study and is subdivided into the categories of ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’. ‘Skills’ relate to the ability to apply knowledge to perform tasks and solve problems. A distinction is drawn here between procedural and sensorimotor skills. ‘Competences’ denotes the regular and routine application of knowledge and skills in the context of work and is divided into ‘professional’ and ‘personal’ competences. The formulation of this descriptor gives due weight to the importance of practical experience and indicates that other competences beyond technical ones can be acquired, contributing to the development of the individual both within and outside work situations. While it is not envisaged that any VET qualifications will be aligned to level 1, levels 2 to 5 are open to the various qualifications for vocational education and training. With respect to levels 5 to 8, the NQF VPET is compatible with the level descriptors for the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). However, only professional qualifications will be aligned to NQF-VPET; university qualifications are assigned to the NQF-HE.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The development of the NQF-VPET has been rapid and was initiated in 2009-10. During 2011, the responsible ministry ⁽⁶⁾ organised a series of roundtables for representatives of cantons, trade associations, and the social partners. Based on the oral and written comments received on the proposal during these gatherings, the documents forming the basis for the consultation spring 2012 ⁽⁷⁾ were amended.

The proposal has received support from stakeholders (cantons, trade associations and social partners), linked to two particular issues. First, the NQF is seen as a precondition for increasing the visibility and value of Swiss qualifications abroad and supporting employment opportunities for Swiss citizens. Second, the NQF builds directly on the shift to learning outcomes initiated by the 2004 reform of the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training. This reform introduced a more outcome-oriented approach to defining VET programmes and qualifications. A total of more than 600 different qualifications have been redefined in dialogue between trade associations and public authorities, preparing the ground for the overarching learning outcomes approach now taken forward by the NQF-VPET.

The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) ⁽⁸⁾, is in charge of the implementation of the framework. SERI plays a key role in organising and quality assuring the levelling process. SERI also takes on the role of national contact point for the EQF.

⁽⁶⁾ Eidgenössisches Volkswirtschaftsdepartement (Federal Department for Economic Affairs).

⁽⁷⁾ Reactions to the consultation are available at:
<http://www.bbt.admin.ch/themen/01051/01071/01076/01312/index.html?lang=de>
[accessed 5.12.2016].

⁽⁸⁾ SERI: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home.html>

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁹⁾

A number of key national factors should be taken into account when considering the Swiss perspective on validation: the federalism, the quadrilinguism and the complex articulation of the Swiss education area. Since January 2013, all matters relating to education, research and innovation at federal level have been brought together in the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER). The State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) has been combined with the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) to form the SERI: both are now part of the EAER. SERI has overall governance of validation projects throughout Switzerland, supporting or checking the pilot projects implemented in cooperation with specific services, and coordinating processes in the different education and training degrees and sectors. It is also the organisation in charge of developing the NQF, initially just for VET qualifications, and it will maintain existing validation practices.

Switzerland has defined validation procedures mainly for VET and further professional training. In other sectors there are no binding rules; instead, various official documents include indications for development and diffusion of validation procedures. Access to validation is considered an individual right, and validation practices are optional.

Validation is formally referred to as one of the four possible ways of obtaining a qualification in upper secondary VET ⁽¹⁰⁾. Full qualifications, as well as exemptions and provision of access, can be also obtained for higher VET and professional education and training (PET). The OPET (now integrated in SERI) developed national validation guidelines in 2010 specifying five different validation phases: information and advising, self-evaluation, assessment, accreditation (or partial certification) and certification. These phases, although referring specifically to the upper-secondary level of VET, also act as a general indicator of other Swiss validation practices.

⁽⁹⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

⁽¹⁰⁾ The other ways are: structured curriculum of study (classical formal way); admission of adults to professional exams without having participated in a formal curriculum of study; shortened initial vocational training if the adult is able to demonstrate his or her knowledge within the desired professional domain.

In higher education, regulation is normally decentralised to the institutional level; depending on the type of university (Cantonal universities, universities of applied science, and university colleges for teacher education) procedures and regulations might differ. There are options for admission into a programme without a baccalaureate and the possibility to validate, partially or completely, a higher education degree.

Validation procedures, both in VET and higher education, use the standards of formal qualification/programmes as reference.

The Labour Market and Unemployment Insurance, part of the State Secretariat of Economic Affairs, has set up skills assessment centres that carry out personal *bilans* (skills audits) to identify skills and know-how acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, and aid development of a personal or professional portfolio. There are other initiatives of this nature in Switzerland, normally integrated into career guidance practices, though it is not clear how these are connected to formal qualification standards.

NQF implementation

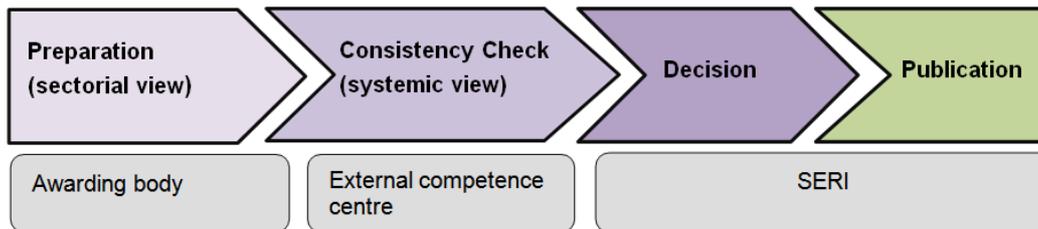
The NQF-VPET became formally operational on 1 October 2014. The decision to assign levels to single qualifications is an important feature of the Swiss approach and signals that the learning outcomes approach is taken seriously; this means that qualifications belonging to the same category, for example initial VET, can be placed at different levels. A set of guidelines have been developed supporting education and training stakeholders in carrying out this levelling. Existing vocational and professional qualifications will be assigned levels during a three-year initial process (ending 2017). Following this initial period, qualifications will be levelled when there is need (new or revised qualifications). By July 2016 ⁽¹¹⁾ a total of 82 qualifications had been attributed levels. These were distributed as shown in Table 2. Figure 1 outlines the main steps in the Swiss levelling process.

⁽¹¹⁾ <https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20151046/index.html>

Table 2. **Distribution of qualifications according to levels**

Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7
8	19	14	30	11

Figure 1. **Main steps in the Swiss levelling process**

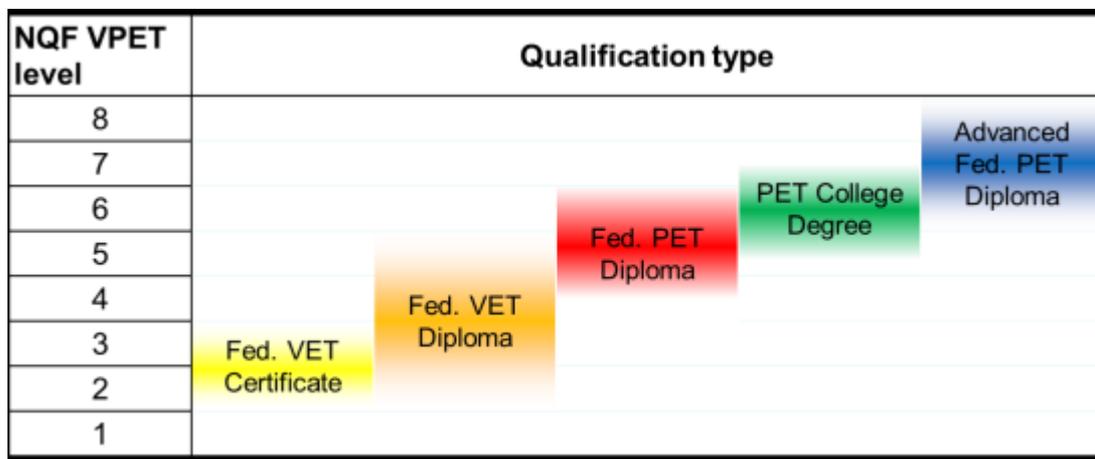


Referencing to the EQF

The NQF-VPET was referenced to the EQF in May 2015. Figure 2 shows the approximate alignment of EQF and NQF-VPET levels and how different categories of qualifications fit into the framework.

Figure 2. **Indication of qualifications types to be included in the NQF-VPET and approximate level**

NQF VPET level	Qualification type
8	
7	
6	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	



NB: Federal VET certificate, two years' vocational education and training at upper-secondary level.
Federal VET diploma, three-four years' vocational education and training at upper-secondary level.
Federal PET diploma, part-time tertiary level professional education and training.
PET college degree is a diploma from a college of professional education and training, tertiary level professional education and training (minimum two years' academic study or three years' part-time study with work placement).
Advanced Federal PET diploma, part-time tertiary level professional education and training.

Source: SERI, 2015.

Further source of information

SERI acts as EQF NCP

<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/de/home/themen/berufsbildung/nqr.html>

List of abbreviations

EAER	Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
NQF-PVET	national qualifications framework for professional and vocational education and training
NQR-CH	<i>Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen Schweiz</i> [Swiss national qualifications framework]
NQR-CH-BB	<i>Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung</i> [national qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training]
NQR CH-HS	Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich [qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area]
OPET	Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology
PET	professional education and training
SER	Staatssekretariat für Bildung und Forschung [State Secretariat for Education and Research]
SERI	Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation]
VET	vocational education and training

References

European Commission et al. (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non- formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Switzerland*.

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/e_referencing_report_final_ch.pdf