

NQF state of play

 **Switzerland 2018**

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Introduction and context

Switzerland is situated well above EU averages with regard to several key indicators in education and training and has exceeded EU 2020 targets in a number of areas. Tertiary education attainment is one of the highest (52.8% in 2017, compared to the EU average of 39.9%); employment of recent graduates at 86.2% in 2017 exceeds the EU average of 80.2%; adult participation in learning was 31.2% in 2017, the highest in Europe; and early leaving from education is among the lowest (4.5% in 2017), well below the EU average of 10.6 % (European Commission, 2018).

Swiss vocational and professional education (VPET) enjoys considerable prestige and labour market relevance. Around two-thirds of all young people coming out of compulsory school opt for vocational education and training (SERI, 2018). However, 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 national qualifications framework (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 competences.

The framework was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (SERI, 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.

Policy objectives

The NQF-VPET aims to improve transparency and comparability of Swiss vocational and professional qualifications. More specific objectives (SERI, 2015: 33) are to:

- a. map the Swiss VPET system adequately and thus improve the transparency, clarity and comparability of Swiss vocational and professional qualifications in relation to European ones;
- b. promote equal recognition and valuing of vocational and professional education and training in society in comparison with academic qualifications;
- c. aid employer understanding of the competences of graduates of Swiss vocational and professional courses and of graduates from other countries, to meet the needs of the labour market;
- d. strengthen, as part of an overall strategy, the recognition of Swiss higher vocational and professional education and training;
- e. improve the opportunities for Swiss-educated professionals to get jobs abroad and so increase overall mobility.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The level descriptors of the NQF-VPET reflect the competence approach ([5]) 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	Knowledge
	Understanding
Skills	Procedural skills
	Sensorimotor skills
Social competence	Professional competences
	Personal competences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● autonomy ● social competences ● leadership competences

Source: SERI, 2015; Swiss Government, 2014.

It is emphasised that the descriptors are defined specifically in relation to Swiss vocational and professional education and training (SERI, 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; it 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 VET qualifications. 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 are aligned to the NQF-VPET; university qualifications are assigned to the NQF CH-HS ([6]).

Professional competences are described in reference documents: ordinances, training plans for VET, the examination ordinances and guidelines for federal examinations, and framework curricula for colleges of higher education. Almost all documents are already described in competences, or are planned for revision. If a VPET qualification is not described in competences it must have undergone revision before it can be assigned an NQF-VPET level (SERI, 2015).

In VET each ordinance is based on a qualification profile, which is a basis for a training plan, defining competences as minimum standards for training.

The federal government approves the examination regulations for federal diplomas of higher education and advanced federal diplomas of higher education; these include regulating admission to examinations, legally protected title, the professional competences and the occupational profile. A qualification profile is the basis for examination ordinances and guidelines, drawn up by professional organisations in cooperation with practitioners in the profession. It includes professional competences, occupational profile and performance criteria.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Swiss NQF-VPET is legally embedded in the Ordinance on the NQF-VPET qualifications, in force from 1 October 2014. The responsibilities of bodies involved in referencing and implementing the framework are clearly defined in the Annex 6.3 of that ordinance and explanatory note to the ordinance ([7]).

The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) ([8]), is in charge of framework implementation. SERI plays a key role in coordinating and quality assuring the entire levelling/assignment process from proposal until publication of the level in line with the Article 2 of the Ordinance. SERI also takes on the role of national contact point for the EQF in its capacity as the expert body for the NQF-VPET. It provides all necessary information to awarding bodies and other stakeholders and assists in the assignment of qualifications. Guidelines ([9]) on the NQF-VPET (SERI, 2015, Annex 4) have been developed, that describe in detail individual steps and the responsibilities in relation to assignment of qualifications to the NQF-VPET.

The Swiss federal institute for initial and continuing training (SFIVET) supports implementation with consistency checks and review of the coherence of proposed levels of qualifications in line with the methodology and guidelines.

Before the final decision on levelling is made, twice a year SERI consults the Federal commission for vocational and professional education and training (FCVPET), in existence since 1970. This is a tripartite body involving cantons, professional organisations and colleges of higher education in the implementation of the NQF-VPET.

Quality assurance of VPET and qualifications is legally embedded in the Federal act on vocational and professional education and training and corresponding ordinances at all levels.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[10]

A number of key national factors should be taken into account when considering the Swiss perspective on validation: the federalism, the quadrilingualism and the complex articulation of responsibilities in the Swiss education area. SERI is the Swiss federal government's specialised agency for national and international matters in education and training. SERI coordinates validation projects throughout Switzerland, supporting or checking pilot projects cooperating with specific services and stakeholders. It is also the organisation in charge of implementing the NQF-VPET.

A slow, but steady increase in validation of non-formal and informal learning can be seen in Switzerland. Increasingly, validation has been an integral part of education policies and legal frameworks (e.g. Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act, the 2017 Federal Act on Continuing Education and Training, the vision 2030 of vocational training, research and education for 2017-20 guidelines) but less so of employment and youth policies and those in the third sector. Validation is not a systematic measure to fight unemployment.

Validation procedures are integrated within each education and training sector; procedures, regulation, practices are more widespread in 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 practices are optional.

Validation is formally referred to as one of several possible ways of obtaining a qualification in upper secondary VET ([11]). Full qualifications, as well as exemptions and provision of access, can be also obtained in tertiary professional education and training. 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 VET upper secondary level, also act as a general indicator of other Swiss validation practices. In December 2018, a new guide for the recognition and accreditation of

prior learning (including validation) in IVET was published ([12]).

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 and impact

Switzerland has established two sectoral qualifications frameworks: one encompassing vocational and professional education (NQF-VPET) and a separate one for qualifications in Swiss Higher education (NQF CH-HS). The NQF-VPET became formally operational on 1 October 2014. At the start of NQF-VPET implementation, single qualifications were assigned NQF-VPET levels. However, experience has shown that most qualifications of a given type are assigned to the same level. Since summer 2016, professional organisations have two options: applying for simplified referencing of qualifications or seek individualised referencing of qualifications ([13]). For simplified assignment of levels, qualifications are assigned according to a standard level for a type of qualification, proposed by SERI ([14]). This reduces workload for the professional organisation submitting the application. A professional organisation can request an individual levelling of a qualification if it feels that a specific qualification might be assigned higher levels within the NQF-VPET. In this case levelling is based on learning outcomes of each qualification description and takes into account the specifics of each profession. Close cooperation with all stakeholders is required to reach a consensus on a level for a specific qualification.

SERI maintains a list of qualifications that have been referenced to the NQF-VPET. It updates this list twice each year, in January and July. The assigned NQF-VPET reference level of a given qualification becomes official as soon as it has been added to this list. By January 2019 ([15]) a total of 474 of roughly 700 formal vocational and professional qualifications had been attributed levels; 207 IVET qualifications mostly distributed to levels 3 and 4; 264 of professional qualifications, mostly at levels 5 to 7; and three at level 8. The process is expected to continue. Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) is not integrated into the NQF-VPET (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International, 2019).

The NQF-VPET plays an important transparency role. The classification of qualifications did not imply any change in Swiss vocational education and training. In the same vein, validation of non-formal and informal learning and the links to the NQF-VPET did not change.

A database of all State-recognised occupations and professions and programmes is available in German, French and Italian, but does not include NQFs and EQF levels ([16]). NQFs and EQF levels are indicated on Europass supplements for VET and tertiary professional qualifications

([17]). With a detailed profile of skills and competence to be achieved by a qualification holder, together with an NQF-VPET level, the Europass supplements are intended to make it easier to understand and compare Swiss qualifications with others elsewhere. There are no plans to include levels on certificates and diplomas (European Commission; Cedefop, 2018).

The NQF-VPET has been promoted mostly through professional organisations and sectors ([18]).

Referencing to the EQF

The NQF-VPET was referenced to the EQF in May 2015. Figure 1 shows the approximate alignment of EQF and NQF-VPET levels and how different categories of qualifications fit into the framework.

Main sources of information

● State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) acts as EQF NCP: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home.html>

● NQF VPET website:
<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet.html>

● List of assigned vocational and professional qualifications:

<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/bildung/mobilitaet/nqf-vpet/das-verzeichnis-der-eingestueten-abschluesse.html>

● A database of all state recognised occupations and professions (available in German, French and Italian):

<https://www.becc.admin.ch/becc/public/bvz>

● Swiss EQF referencing report (SERI (2015):

https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/e_referencing_report_final_ch.pdf

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Advanced federal diploma of higher education	8
7	Advanced federal diploma of higher education	7
6	Advanced federal diploma of higher education College of higher education diploma Federal diploma of higher education	6
5	Federal diploma of higher education Federal VET diploma	5
4	Federal VET diploma	4
3	Federal VET certificate	3
2	(not available)	2
1	(not available)	1

Acronyms

EAER	Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
FCVPET	Federal Commission for Vocational and Professional Education and Training
NQF-VPET	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	<i>Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich</i> [qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area]
OPET	Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology
PET	professional education and training
SER	<i>Staatssekretariat für Bildung und Forschung</i> [State Secretariat for Education and Research]
SERI	<i>Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation</i> [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation]
SFIVET	Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training

References

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European Commission (2018). Education and training monitor leaflet.
http://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/2018-education-and-training-monitor-leaflet_en

European Commission; Cedefop (2018). Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF [unpublished].

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming).
European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning
2016: country report Switzerland.

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

SERI (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*.
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/e_referencing_report_final_ch.pdf

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) (2018).
Vocational and professional education and training in Switzerland: facts and figures 2018.
https://www.berufsbildungplus.ch/berufsbildungplus/fachportal/service/shop_neu.html

Notes

- [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 13.2.2019].
- [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]. <https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/index.html>
- [4] Information on the adoption of the framework: <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/de/home/themen/berufsbildung/nqr.html>
- [5] Two models are commonly used in Switzerland to structure competence-oriented documents: competence-oriented model and the competence-and-resources model. They determine how professional competences are described and structured in training plans. For more information consult appendix 6.6 of the referencing report (SERI, 2015).
- [6] It includes diplomas from cantonal universities, federal institutes of technology, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education and other specialised institutions.
- [7] Erläuterungsbericht: <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home/bildung/mobilitaet/nqf-vpet.html>
- [8] SERI: <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home.html>
- [9] Available in German, Italian and French: <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet/das-vorgehen-zur-einstufung.html>
- [10] This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission et al., forthcoming).
- [11] 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.
- [12] Available in German, French and Italian: <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/de/home/bildung/berufsbildungssteuerung-und-politik/projekte-und-initiativen/berufsabschluss-und-berufswechsel-fuer-erwachsene/leitfaden-anrechnung-von-bildungsleistungen-in-der-beruflichen-g.html>
- [13] <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home/bildung/mobilitaet/nqf-vpet/das-vorgehen-zur-einstufung.html>

[14] SERI proposes a standard reference level for each type of a qualification:  â€Federal certificate of vocational education and training (two-year VET programmes): level 3; â€Federal diploma of vocational education and training (three- and four-year VET programmes): level 4; â€Federal diploma of higher education (federal professional examination): level 5;  â€Advanced Federal diploma of higher education (federal professional examination): level 6; â€Advanced Federal diploma of higher education (formal study programme): level 6.

[15] <https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20151046/index.html>

[16] <https://www.becc.admin.ch/becc/public/bvz>

[17] <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet.html>

[18] <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet.html>

Related content

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