NQF state of play

Finland 2018

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Introduction and context

Finland has a well-functioning education and training system. According to the 2015 Programme for international student assessment (PISA), student performance in reading is the best in the EU; it is second best in mathematics and science. Socioeconomic factors impact student achievements to a lesser degree compared to other EU countries; however, there are inequalities reflecting gender and migrant background, with boys and foreign-born children performing worse. While the rate of participation of children above age four in early education and care is among the lowest in the EU (87.4% in 2016), the percentage of early leavers from education and training is relatively low (8.2% in 2017) but shows a gender imbalance (9.5% for males and 6.9% for females). A new and comprehensive initiative in school education, including new curricula at all education levels, learner-centred pedagogy and a collaborative teacher development programme, aims to address inequalities and further increase education quality. Tertiary education attainment reached 44.6% in 2017, exceeding the EU 2020 target. However, employment among recent tertiary graduates is below the EU average (77%, compared to 80.2%). Among the priorities in higher education are to increase the internationalisation and labour market relevance of programmes, the latter through more emphasis on generic skills. Participation in vocational education and training (VET) is substantially higher than in other EU countries (71 % compared to 49%) and apprenticeship schemes are increasingly offered. A new act on VET was adopted in 2017 aiming for comprehensive reform, including a move towards a demand-driven system and individualised pathways to qualifications. Participation of adults in lifelong learning is among the highest in the EU, reaching 27.4% in 2017 (European Commission, 2018).

Work on the Finish national qualifications framework (FiNQF) has taken longer than originally foreseen. It started in August 2008 and, following two public consultations in 2009 and 2010, the government presented a proposal to parliament in autumn 2010. According to this, the NQF would cover officially recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training and higher education) at all levels. After a change of government in 2011, the original proposal was slightly revised and resubmitted to Parliament in May 2012 (Act on a national framework for exam-based and other competences). Due to resistance within parliament, this proposal was never taken forward and offered up for voting. Following elections and yet another change of government, a third proposal was submitted to parliament in mid-2016 and was accepted. The Act on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules ([1]) and the Government Decree on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules both came into force in March 2017 ([2]). FiNQF was referenced to the European qualifications

framework (EQF) in December 2017.

The FiNQF is a comprehensive framework covering the full range of national qualifications, including those awarded outside the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture (for example related to defence, police and border-guards). The law also allows for extensive competence modules, the extent of which may be less than that of a qualification, to be levelled and included in the framework.

A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed in 2005 and now forms an integrated part of the NQF. Finland has carried out referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the European higher education area as one process.

Policy objectives

The FiNQF reflects the current system of qualifications and so specific policy strategic targets have not been set. However, the FiNQF is used as a tool for promoting the learning outcomes-based approach, mobility and recognition of knowledge, skills and competences.

The main objectives are to strengthen the learning outcomes-based approach and improve the transparency of the qualifications and system of education.

The FiNQF is used in combination with other initiatives, including policies on transfer and progression, validation of non-formal and informal learning, and quality assurance. Certain rights, such as access to further study, were guaranteed through other legislation prior to the adoption of the NQF. Implementation of these policies is at an advanced stage.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The Finnish learning-outcomes-based framework includes qualifications from all levels of the education system that are part of the general education, VET and higher education sectors. In addition to qualifications awarded within the remit of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the FiNQF also includes those from other ministries' remits, such as the police, fire and rescue services, and national defence. Other competences (qualifications and competence modules) will be addressed in a second phase. All qualifications in the framework are regulated by national legislation.

The Finnish education and qualifications system is designed so that there are no dead ends; vocational qualifications give access to all forms of higher education.

The NQF act and government decree introduced an eight-level framework reflecting the knowledge, skills and competence components of the EQF. While the descriptors were inspired by the EQF, they have also been adapted to suit the national context. The explicit distinction between knowledge, skills and competence used by the EQF is dropped and replaced by one 'integrated' column summarising the requirements for each level, integrating knowledge, skills and competences, and their interrelationships ([3]). This is seen as more in line with the way learning outcomes actually are written in Finland.

While the requirements for knowledge and skills are closely aligned to those of the EQF, the descriptors related to competences reflect national objectives in these areas (for example related to key competences for lifelong learning and language skills). A good illustration is the descriptor for level 4, where personal and social competences are described in the following way (FiNQF Government Decree):

- Has a good command of the knowledge base of his/her field of work or study in broad contexts in and certain cognitive and practical skills as well as expression skills, and makes use of such knowledge and skills when solving problems specific to his/her field and carrying out tasks in the field. Works independently in operating environments that are usually predictable, but are subject to change.
- Takes responsibility for completion of his/her tasks and works safely and responsibly within a work community. Works in an economical, productive and systematic manner, and organises his/her work taking other actors into consideration. Is able to supervise routine tasks performed by others. Has the ability to work in an entrepreneurial manner in someone else's service or as an independent entrepreneur in the field. Evaluates his/her competence and scope of duties and improves actions relating to work or studies.

Develops himself/herself and his/her work.

- Has the ability for lifelong learning. Acts in a way that complies with ethical principles when interacting with different people in learning and working communities and other groups and networks. Communicates diversely and interactively in different situations and produces varied and also field-specific texts in his/her mother tongue. Communicates in the second national language and interacts in his own field in at least one foreign language, also internationally.

Source: FiNQF Government Decree, annex.

The example shows that, while the aspects of 'autonomy' and 'responsibility' are highlighted (as in the EQF), explicit reference is also made to the ability to work as 'an independent entrepreneur', to be able to 'evaluate his/her competence and scope of duties', to pursue 'lifelong learning', 'to act in a way that complies with ethical principles', 'to communicate diversely and interactively', and 'interact in his own field in at least one foreign language, also internationally'.

Developments within the Finnish education system have long been parallel with the objectives of the EQF; vocational competence-based qualifications were introduced in the mid-1990s and learning-outcomes-based vocational qualifications in the late 1990s. In higher education, Finland has actively and at an early stage complied with what was agreed in the Bologna process. The shift towards learning outcomes in higher education has been slower than in other sectors of education, but the progression has been systematic and it has intensified in recent years.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The FiNQF has been formally adopted, and came into force in 2017, by the Act on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules and the Government Decree on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules.

A broad range of stakeholders was involved in the early, preparatory stages of the NQF developments. The delays encountered with the legal proposal between 2012 and 2016 meant that systematic dialogue on the role of the framework stopped but the relaunch in 2016 was supported by broad consultation.

It is significant that higher education institutions have supported the development of the NQF from the start and have contributed to the framework design. This seems to reflect the existing Finnish education and training system, where interaction between general, vocational and higher education and training institutions seems to operate more smoothly than in many other countries. This may partly be explained by the role played by professionally oriented higher education, promoting professional training at bachelor and master level. A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed from 2005 and is now an integrated part of the new comprehensive FiNQF.

The Ministry of Education and Culture is the national authority responsible for the FiNQF and the further development of this framework. The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) ([4]) is a government agency working under the Ministry of Education and Culture. EDUFI is responsible for developing education and training, early childhood education and care, and lifelong learning, as well as for promoting internationalisation. As a national development agency, EDUFI has a wide range of tasks, one of which is to advise higher education institutions in matters concerning diploma supplements. Currently, in its role as the national Europass centre, EDUFI guides the higher education institutions on the diploma supplement references to qualifications frameworks. The agency guides and supports cooperation between stakeholders, working life Committees ([5]) and VNFIL providers.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a regulation in which the following tasks were assigned to EDUFI as the national co-ordination point for the European qualifications framework (EQF-NCP): participation in the development and implementation of the EQF; disseminating information to stakeholders about the EQF, the NQF and the placement of qualifications to the framework; giving guidance and advice to stakeholders in using the qualifications framework; taking part in

national and international collaboration on qualifications frameworks and promoting cooperation; and other tasks assigned by the ministry. In 2009, the Ministry of Education and Culture also asked EDUFI to represent Finland in the network of national correspondents for qualifications frameworks (EHEA QF).

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

[6]

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has relatively long and established roots in Finland and the legislation and policies are well developed and detailed. As in many other countries, there is no one single law on validation of non-formal and informal learning, but laws and regulations for each field of education define validation separately. These fields include general upper secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has gone through relatively profound changes since the 2016 inventory on non-formal and informal learning ([7]). In 2015, major VET reform planning commenced and was enforced on 1 January 2018 ([8]). The biggest changes brought by the reform concern increasing flexibility of the VET system, overall simplification of the system in terms of legislation (one law, Act on Vocational Education ([9])), reduction in the number of qualifications (164 qualifications instead of 351) and one uniform funding system (instead of several sources of funding).

The working life committees are tripartite bodies (sometimes quadripartite), composed of representatives of employers, employees and/or self-employed persons, and the education sector.

Validation has not been widely used in general upper secondary education. A proposal for a new Act on General Upper Secondary Education ([10]) appears to strengthen the potential of validation in this sector: First, general upper secondary education will start using credit points, which facilitates recognition of prior learning. Second, it is proposed that practices for identifying and recognising competence acquired elsewhere before and during general upper secondary studies would be improved.

In all other sectors (VET and HE) validation arrangements are in place and typically cover the four validation stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. VET qualifications are modular and units of qualifications are awarded in increasing numbers. In VET – both initial (IVET) and continuing (CVET) – there are national standards (qualification requirements) and validation arrangements are well defined in laws and policies. The VET sector has applied a competence-based approach since 1994 and the qualification requirements are defined in terms of learning outcomes.

The Universities of applied sciences Act (932/2014, §37) (*Ammattikorkeakoululaki*) and the Universities Act (558/2009, §44) (*Yliopistolaki*) state that a student may – in accordance with the decision of the higher education institution – have his/her prior studies accredited when studying for a degree or specialisation studies. A student may also have prior non-formal or informal learning demonstrated in some other manner substituted for studies belonging to a degree or specialisation studies syllabus, or counted towards a degree or specialisation studies.

Validation arrangements in higher education are relatively young in comparison with the VET sector. However, most of the curricula are described in terms of learning outcomes, the validation methodologies are continuously developing, and validation is increasing in popularity as it is relatively well known among students. New initiatives and projects promoting and developing validation arrangements are carried out in different areas of higher education.

The labour market has a central role in the Finnish validation system, especially in VET; however, there are few examples where labour market organisations would independently carry out validation activities in the full meaning of the process. The VET qualifications system is built to serve the labour market and ensure hands-on participation in validation processes.

120 737 individuals were registered in the competence-based qualifications system in 2015:.VET students registered to complete a VET qualification or a module belonging to such a qualification. There is little or no research or statistics on the actual benefits of competence-based qualifications but the number of individuals keeps growing. The EDUFI has collected data on the perceived benefits of the VET qualification system using, for example, the National feedback system of students and candidates (AIPAL). In 2015/16 students and graduates reported that they viewed that previously acquired competence significantly shortened the preparatory training and the time needed to complete qualification (75% of candidates). A similar number of respondents reported that it had been possible to organise the competence test in their own workplace (76%). Some 80% viewed that they had received enough guidance for preparing for the competence test.

NQF implementation and impact

The FiNQF reached full operational stage when the legal basis came into force on 1 March 2017. The Finnish NCP has a communication strategy that involves providing up-to-date information about the FiNQF on their website ([11]) and producing other information materials. The NCP will continue to develop and maintain communication with relevant partners. Generally, all information disseminated is intended for the general public and designed to be accessible on the web.

The FiNQF is well-known and comprehensively used by education and training institutions. It is also well known by recognition authorities and bodies, but less so by guidance and counselling practitioners; for the general public it varies. Promotional work is required to increase awareness by labour market stakeholders.

The Finnish National Agency for Education maintains a portal – Studyinfo.fi ([12]) – which provides information on study programmes and about applying for studies. The information provided in this portal is designed to meet the needs of the individual learners, education providers, officials and study counsellors. The portal also contains the requirements for all syllabi and qualifications prepared at EDUFI ([13]).

In 2019, the Ministry of Education and Culture will prepare the legislative changes needed to the Act and Decree identified by the committee that worked in 2018 on expanding the scope of the FiNQF and levelling of new qualifications to the framework.

Referencing to the EQF

FiNQF was referenced to the EQF in December 2017.

FiNQF and EQF levels are currently not included in the qualifications databases. Information about qualifications, the qualification requirements, and their FiNQF and EQF levels is available on the e-perusteet/e-grunder website ([14]) maintained by EDUFI. For VET and general education, both EQF and NQF levels are indicated in the qualification certificate and certificate supplement. For higher education EQF and NQF levels are indicated in diploma supplements.

The scope of the FiNQF will be expanded in 2019, with new types of qualification included. An update of the referencing to the EQF advisory group could be expected at the earliest at the end of 2019.

Important lessons and future plans

The key challenge so far in implementing the FiNQF has been that the legislative process took longer than anticipated. The FiNQF is a framework that describes the qualifications as they were; it is not intended as a tool for revising the qualifications or the qualification structure. The qualification requirements were also drafted prior to the adoption of the FiNQF so that they are compatible with the level descriptors. The regulations on issuing certificates were revised due to the implementation of the FiNQF.

The Finnish Ministry of Education and the Finnish National Agency for Education will continue to increase awareness of the FiNQF, and most important, the FiNQF level descriptors.

Providing the right kind of information to different audiences that support the use of qualifications frameworks requires careful planning and mapping of people's needs. This is challenging since FiNQF is not considered a tool for change but one that provides information and supports developing education in Finland to place the focus on learning outcomes, increased mobility and improved access into further study. One of the specific challenges is to articulate that the framework does not describe learning outcomes of the individual learner, but provides a general description of the type of knowledge, skills and competence the types of qualification give.

Implementation of the FiNQF is now, as envisaged, entering its second phase. The Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland appointed a working group with the mandate to prepare and coordinate the extension of the national qualifications framework to other competences (qualifications and competence modules). The task of the working group was to specify the criteria determined in the current Act on the national framework for qualifications and other competence modules and its justifications for the competence modules to be placed in the framework. The working group was also responsible for charting the extensive competence modules of different administrative sectors. The working group will hand over the report to the Minister of Education and Culture by the end of 2018.

Main sources of information

The Finnish National Agency for Education acts as EQF NCP: http://www.oph.fi/qualificationsframework

Database of programmes from VET, general education and HE: https://studyinfo.fi/wp2/en/

Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture: http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/?lang=en

Finnish National Agency for Education; Ministry of Education and Culture (2017). *Referencing the Finnish national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework and the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area*. https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/finqf_referencing_report_12_april_2018.pdf

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	**Doctor degrees & Post-graduate Licentiate degrees – universities and the National Defence University's scientific and artistic postgraduate degrees (Lisensiaatin ja tohtorin tutkinnot)** **General staff officer degree (Yleisesikuntaupseerin tutkinto)** **Specialist degree in veterinary medicine (Erikoiseläinlääkärin tutkinto)** **Specialist training in medicine (Erikoislääkärikoulutus)** **Specialist training in dentistry (Erikoishammaslääkärikoulutus)**	8
7	**Master degrees – universities (Ylemmät korkeakoulututkinnot)** **Master degrees – universities of applied sciences (Ylemmät ammattikorkeakoulututkinnot)**	7
6	**Bachelor degrees – universities (Alemmat korkeakoulututkinnot)** **Bachelor degrees – universities of applied sciences (Ammattikorkeakoulututkinnot)**	6
5	**Specialist vocational qualifications (Erikoisammattitutkinnot)** **Sub-officer qualification – Fire and rescue services (Alipäällystötutkinto – Pelastusala)** **Vocational qualification in air traffic control (Lennonjohdon perustutkinto)**	5

4	**General upper secondary school leaving certificate (Lukion oppimäärä)** **Matriculation examination (Ylioppilastutkinto)** **Upper secondary vocational qualifications (Ammatilliset perustutkinnot)** **Further vocational qualifications (Ammattitutkinnot)** **Basic examination in prison services (Rikosseuraamusalan tutkinto)** **Fire fighter qualification (Pelastajatutkinto)** **Emergency response centre operator qualification (Hätäkeskuspäivystäjätutkinto)**	4
2	**Basic education certificate (9 years) (Perusopetuksen oppimäärä)**	2
1	**(not available)**	1

Acronyms

AIPAL	national feedback system for students and candidates
EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training
FiNQF	Finnish national qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
VPL	validation of prior learning
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning
EHEA QF	European higher education area qualification framework Framework
EDUFI	Finnish National Agency for Education

References

European Commission (2018) *Education and training monitor 2018: country analysis.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/volume-2-2018-education-and-training-monitor-country-analysis.pdf

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: country report: Finland.*

Finnish National Agency for Education; Ministry of Education and Culture (2017). *Referencing the Finnish national qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework and the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area.* https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/finqf_referencing_report_12_april_2018.pdf

Legislation

Government proposal 204/2016 of 20 October 2016 to the Parliament for an Act on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules: https://www.oph.fi/download/182108_Government_Proposal_204-2016_on_Finnish_NQF_20.10.2016_.pdf

Act 93/2017 of 10 February 2017 on the National Qualifications Framework and other Competence Modules. https://www.oph.fi/download/182270_Act_93-2017.pdf

Government Decree 120/2017 of 23 February 2017 on the National Framework for Qualifications and other Competence Modules. https://www.oph.fi/download/182107_Government_Decree_120-2017_27.2.2017_.pdf

Related content

2018

Finland - European inventory on NQF 2018

European inventory of NQF

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