

NQF state of play

 **Norway 2018**

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Introduction and context

Norwegian 15-year-olds have made clear improvements in the latest edition of the global PISA education ranking ([1]). They performed better in science, maths and reading than they did three years ago, and are now above the OECD average in all three disciplines (OECD, 2015). Compared to the EU 2020 averages, Norwegian pupils are also well above in all three disciplines and have reached the EU 2020 benchmark target for reading. Norway has surpassed the other EU 2020 targets except the benchmark for early leavers from education and training for males. The proportion of early leavers from education is 12.8% for males and 7.9% for females, together totalling 10.4% early leavers from education and training in 2017 (EU average 10.6%). Tertiary educational attainment is one of the highest in Europe (49% in 2017, compared to the EU average of 39.9%) and the employment rate of recent graduates is exceeded only by Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Iceland, Malta and the Netherlands (European Commission, 2018).

The Norwegian national qualifications framework (NQF) developments were triggered both by the 2005 qualifications framework of the European higher education area and by the 2008 recommendation on the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF) and its inclusion in the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) in March 2009 (EEA Joint Committee, 2009). After extensive preparatory work involving main stakeholders, a comprehensive Norwegian national qualifications framework (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring* (NKR)) was adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research in December 2011 ([2]) and, following amendments of the relevant laws relating to education and training, further legally defined in a regulation in December 2017 ([3]).

The NKR consists of seven levels and covers qualifications from general, vocational and higher education. The numbering of the seven levels starts at level 2 ([4]) to ensure a structure that better parallels the levels of the EQF. The question of opening up to qualifications from outside formal education and training (for example, awarded by the private sector) has been extensively discussed. The ministry appointed a committee in October 2013 with the mandate of exploring the possibility of placing qualifications acquired outside the formal education system into the NQF. The committee presented its report to the minister in April 2015. The committee was divided on several issues, such as the assessment of the need for placing non-formal qualifications into the NQF, and how placement should be done. The report, therefore, includes two different models, describing alternative approaches and solutions.

The Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries intend, in dialogue with the Master Craftsman Certificate Committee, to assess if the master craftsman qualification can be placed into the NQF ([5]). However, the process seems to have stalled.

The NKR was referenced to the EQF in June 2014. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) has been appointed as national coordination point (NCP) for the EQF.

The NKR has now reached operational status.

Policy objectives

The NKR aims at describing the existing national education and training system in a transparent way to make it more understandable, at national and international levels. Focusing on improving the transparency of qualifications, the NKR was originally seen as a communication and information tool rather than as a tool for reform. However, through its focus on learning outcomes, an important aim of the NKR – underlined in the 2016 and 2017 white papers on vocational college education and higher education, respectively – is to support quality in education and training. The NQF is also a regulating tool for education and training through the requirement to use learning outcomes, quality assurance, and the development of curricula.

More specific objectives include the following ([6]):

- a. improve communication and mobility within the education sector and between the education sector and the labour market;
- b. offer a description of what a pupil/apprentice/graduate is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of learning;
- c. describe the workings of the Norwegian system in a new manner, which will pave the way for improved education and career guidance;
- d. aid the comparison of qualifications from other countries, via the EQF and the QF-EHEA;
- e. open the way for the development of new instruments for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The level descriptors play a key role in clarifying the similarities and differences between qualifications and their relationships. They are a point of reference for developing and updating qualifications. In this way the framework (now supported by the regulation) acts as a tool for improving the quality and relevance of qualifications.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The NKR adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research in December 2011, and further legally embedded in 2017 regulation, establishes a framework of seven levels, reflecting the structure of existing formal education and training in Norway. The levels are described through the concepts knowledge (*kunnskap*), skills (*ferdighet*) and general competence (*generell kompetanse*).

Table 1. Main NQF level descriptor elements defining levels 2 to 8 in Norway

Level descriptor elements		
Knowledge	Skills	General competence
Understanding of theories, facts, concepts, principles and procedures in a discipline, subject area and/or profession.	The ability to apply knowledge to complete tasks and solve problems. There are different types of skill: cognitive, practical, creative and communicative.	The ability to use knowledge and skills in an independent manner in different situations in study and work contexts, by demonstrating the ability to cooperate, the ability to act responsibly, and a capacity for reflection and critical thinking.

Source: Cedefop (2018). *Analyses and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries*. Luxembourg: Publication Office.

There is broad consensus in Norway on the relevance of the learning outcomes approach. *Knowledge promotion* (*Kunnskapsløftet*), a wide-ranging reform of primary, lower and upper secondary education and training, started in 2004 and implemented in 2006, has been of particular significance; it required comprehensive redefinition and rewriting of learning objectives at these levels. An important reason for using learning outcomes is to encourage curriculum consistency at national level. While adaptation is possible at local level, national consistency is important for reasons of quality and also to support validation of non-formal and informal learning. Today's curricula are based on the *Knowledge promotion* reform and include the core curriculum ([7]), quality framework ([8]) and subject curricula. The core curriculum elaborates on the aims stated in the Education Act ([9]), designates overarching goals for education and training, and sets forth the basis for primary and secondary education and training as a whole in terms of the values, culture and knowledge in which it is grounded. The quality framework, with the learning poster, elaborate on the Education Act and its statutes and set forth the principles that schools and training establishments are to follow in their teaching and training. It must be adapted to local and individual needs and conditions. Subject curricula designate the aim, main subject areas, fundamental skills, competence aims, and criteria for making assessments in a given subject.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has developed a framework for basic skills which is a tool for developing and revising national subject curricula. The five basic skills –oral skills, reading, writing, digital skills and numeracy – are defined as basic to learning in school, work and social life. These skills are fundamental to learning in all subjects as well as a prerequisite for the pupil to show his/her competence and qualifications. All subject-specific curricula describe how the five basic skills contribute to developing the pupils' competence and qualifications and how these skills are integrated into the subject.

Renewal and improvement of subjects in primary and lower secondary education and in upper secondary education and training is now well under way. The renewal builds on the *Knowledge promotion* reform, ensuring continuity for teachers and pupils alike. The focus is on more in-depth learning and better understanding, measures set out in a 2016 white paper ([10]). The white paper was adopted by the Parliament, with some amendments, in October 2016. The new curricula will be used incrementally from 2020.

The learning outcomes approach is widely accepted in education and training, as well as among social partners. The NKR is also an important part of quality assurance mechanisms and intrinsically connected to the systematic work on quality in education. All higher education institutions were requested to adopt learning outcomes in line with the descriptors for levels 6 to 8 of the national qualifications framework in all study programmes by the end of 2012. Mapping by NOKUT, the quality assurance agency, in 2015, and continuing revision of all higher education programmes aimed at qualifications for the health and social sectors, ([11]) show that drafting learning outcomes in line with the NQF is still experienced as challenging. For vocational college education (*fagskole*), level 5, the deadline set for the implementation of learning outcomes was the end of 2014, as work at this level started later than in higher education. In 2014 and 2015, NOKUT engaged an expert panel to assess the learning outcomes proposed in all applications for accreditation of new study programmes; this has helped the vocational colleges in developing and using learning outcomes in all programmes. Compliance with the NKR and the use of learning outcomes is included in the regulations on NOKUT's supervision and control of the quality of college education and of higher education ([12]). This means that learning outcomes are assessed as part of all accreditations and reaccreditations of study programmes.

The NQF is indirectly providing a basis for validation of prior learning and informal competences in the Norwegian system. Arrangements related to validation of non-formal and informal learning have a thorough legal basis and are referenced to the learning outcomes of qualifications in the formal system for education and training and NQF. This has had a considerable impact on validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The regulation on the NQF and the referencing to EQF are linked to legislation in the education system. The regulation provides definitions, indicates roles and responsibilities, states indication of NQF and EQF levels on new certificates, diplomas and/or Europass supplements, and stipulates that curricula and study programmes for qualifications should be based on learning outcomes in accordance with the descriptors for the applicable level.

The development and implementation of the NKR has been based on broad stakeholder involvement. All main education and training stakeholders, as well as representatives from the social partners, have been involved at all levels through the entire process. Stakeholders have generally been engaged in, and committed to, the process, although sometimes expressing different opinions on the role, profile and future direction of the NKR.

The involvement of labour market stakeholders has been significant and is closely linked to their role in vocational training and discussion on opening up to qualifications awarded outside of formal education and training. Norwegian social partners generally see the NKR (and the EQF process) as important and as a way to strengthen dialogue between education and training and the labour market; it is also seen as a key tool in a broader national competence strategy where the interaction between education and training and the labour market is seen as a key issue.

While the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the overall development and implementation of the framework, NOKUT has the role of national coordination point (NCP) for the EQF. It serves as information centre, coordinates activities related to the NQF and the EQF, and is responsible for the main NKR web presentation ([13]).

NOKUT is a government agency established in 2003. Its main responsibilities include:

- a. conducting evaluations and quality control, and stimulating quality development of education provision in Norwegian higher education and vocational college education (levels 5 to 8);
- b. recognising foreign higher education qualifications, vocational college education and vocational upper secondary qualifications, based on individual applications, and providing information about mechanisms for the recognition and authorisation of foreign qualifications;
- c. being Norwegian ENIC-NARIC, information centre and national contact point for the diploma supplement and for the professional qualifications directive.

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

[14]

There are laws and regulations on validation of non-formal and informal learning for each level of education and training covered by the NKR. Validation arrangements are based on shared basic principles across all sectors. One of these is that the validation process should be voluntary and of benefit to the individual. Although participation in validation is voluntary, the legal framework guarantees the rights of individuals to undertake it.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning, known in Norway as *realkompetansevurdering* (validation of real competence, or recognition of prior learning) is clearly defined and used as a specific term in laws, regulations and guidelines. Real competence includes formal, non-formal and informal learning. Although formal learning is not assessed separately, it is included as part of the new total assessment.

Responsibility for local provision in primary, lower and upper secondary education (levels 2 to 4) is decentralised to municipality and county education administrations respectively and based on the learning outcomes described in the curricula.

In vocational college education and higher education (levels 5 to 8), validation of non-formal and informal learning is mainly used for admission, and exemption. At these levels, each institution provides validation procedures based on the learning outcomes of the relevant study programme. Each institution is autonomous, so there are no general procedures for validation of competence at NQF levels 5 and above. However, in 2013, as a follow-up of a 2009 white paper on the education strategy ([15]), [Skills Norway](#) – formerly Vox – developed two guidelines on assessing prior learning together with representatives from the sectors: one related to admission to vocational college education, and one to recognition of prior learning in (i.e. as part of) higher education.

In lower and upper secondary education, the outcome of validation of non-formal and informal learning can be a document showing that the individual has achieved a full qualification (certificate); if the individual has not achieved a full qualification, the document awarded is a 'certificate of competence'. In VET programmes, it is not possible to obtain a full qualification based on validation of non-formal and informal learning alone. Applicants must pass the final trade examination to obtain the final VET (trade or journeyman's) certificate.

In higher education, a student who achieves some courses through validation, and others via formal learning, will not receive a grade for the validated courses (only the indication 'Pass'), whereas most other courses passed will be graded by the letters A to E. For validation students who wish to continue their studies, the lack of grades in certain courses might be a disadvantage when competing for a place at a master level.

In the Erasmus KA3 project VISKA (visible skills for adults) 2017-20, the focus is on developing methods and processes to increase the access of migrants to validation of prior learning processes, education and work ([16]). [Skills Norway](#) is coordinating this project.

There are also validation mechanisms in enterprises (such as the 2018-21 social partner agreement on documenting workers' competence, Paragraphs18-4 ([17])).

In the Norwegian strategy for skills policy 2017-21 ([18]), the strategy partners have agreed to make it easier to document skills acquired at work and to develop a method and model for evaluating skills acquired in the workplace. A working group appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research has developed a pilot on validation of non-formal and informal learning within the retail trade ([19]). The pilot was coordinated by the Enterprise Federation of Norway (Virke) in cooperation with the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS) in dialogue with the ministry. The pilot did not aim to compare or contrast skills acquired in the workplace with those acquired in formal education; it brought a broader understanding of the development of skills in the workplace. A follow-up evaluation by the Fafo Research Foundation recommends that the model should now be tested to ensure its applicability ([20]).

Internal validation procedures at the workplace, linked to wage negotiations or competence development in companies, can also be found outside the formal system of validation. In these instances, validation references are based on local requirements defined by the company concerned.

A study was recently conducted by the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway ([21]). It concludes that there is a lot more to be done, both in education and working life, before a well-functioning national system for documentation and validation is established. Another conclusion is that a good system for data collection on the use of the different validation schemes and benefit for the individual is lacking.

NQF implementation and impact

All qualifications in the Norwegian formal education system are included in the NKR; most formal qualifications are included *en bloc*. Quality assurance of qualifications in the formal education system is secured through the legislation on all education levels in the system. The NKR has been incorporated into these laws and regulations by explicitly referring curricula and study programmes to the relevant level descriptors.

The NKR is being used indirectly for validation of non-formal and informal learning in that validation arrangements are measured against the learning outcomes of formal qualifications.

NOKUT uses the national qualifications framework to support recognition of qualifications and aims at taking national qualifications frameworks into account more systematically in methodologies for recognition of foreign education and training when possible. In autumn 2018, NOKUT carried out public consultation on proposed changes in the criteria for general recognition of higher education to bring them more in line with developments in the field; this included the recommendation on revised criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications, a subsidiary text of the Lisbon Recognition Convention ([22]). According to NOKUT, the recognition of upper secondary and post-secondary VET qualifications is challenging because of the great variation in vocational education and training systems at these levels. NOKUT is therefore exploring ways in which this connection can be supported better and in which the EQF can help communicate foreign qualifications.

The framework as referenced to the EQF in 2014 is generally referred to as a permanent and fully integrated part of the Norwegian education and training system, including in laws and regulations and relevant policy documents.

Mapping of the implementation of NKR is planned for 2019. Current EQF relevant databases are [Utdanning.no](#) and [Study in Norway](#) ([23]). The database [Utdanning.no](#) gives information about education and training possibilities and programmes in upper secondary education and training, vocational college education, higher education, folk high schools (boarding schools without exams and grades), and further and continuing education (flexible courses or education offers at all levels, often based on professional experience). This database also offers different tools for use in career guidance. [Study in Norway](#) contains study programmes in English in higher education extracted from [Utdanning.no](#).

The NCP has a communication strategy to improve the digital access points and online information and to create written information. For the period 2018-20, the NCP aims to further develop its communication strategy, mainly through seminars and workshops with stakeholders from the labour market and social partners (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

Norway referenced its national qualifications framework to the EQF in June 2014, along with the self-certification to the QF-EHEA.

While the EQF advisory group considered the link between the NKR and the EQF to be transparent, some questions were raised regarding the levelling of qualifications at levels 5 and 6.

The Norwegian NKR regulation provides the legal basis for the possible inclusion of NKR levels in new diplomas and certificates. Alternatively, EQF levels can be indicated on supporting documentation such as the Europass certificate supplement or the diploma supplement.

NKR levels are currently included on diplomas from vocational college education. In higher education, NKR levels are included on the diploma supplement, which is conferred automatically and free of charge to all graduates. NKR and EQF levels are included on certificate supplements in vocational upper secondary education and training.

Important lessons and future plans

The NKR is fully operational and included in relevant regulations on education and training. It is also established as a tool for quality enhancement and quality assurance.

The NKR is widely known and systematically used among recognition authorities and bodies. It is known among social partners, but to a lesser degree among employers. Guidance and counselling practitioners have some knowledge of the framework. The student unions claim high information value for the NKR and learning outcomes in education. Both the NKR and EQF are less known by the general public.

The learning outcomes approach is widely accepted in education and training, as well as among social partners. The NQR is an important part of quality assurance mechanisms and intrinsically connected to the systematic work on quality in education. Different mobility tools, including the EQF, provide contact points between authorities and stakeholders in education and training. However, there is little evidence of particular cooperation between education and labour market stakeholders related to the NKR.

Despite all successful implementation of the different objectives, there is little reliable evidence today when it comes to the impact of EQF and NKR on mobility and transparency, or on quality.

No evaluation of the NKR has been carried out so far, but mapping is planned for 2019. Changes stemming from this evaluation might be relevant for updating the referencing report (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctoral degrees (ph.d, dr. philos., ph.d. in artistic development work (from 2018)) Diploma for artistic development programme (Diplom, kunstnerisk utviklingsprogram)	8
7	Master degree (Mastergrad) Master of Arts Master of business administration (MBA) Master of international business (MIB) Master of technology management Master of laws Candidata/candidatus medicinae Candidata/candidatus medicinae veterinariae Candidata/candidatus psychologiae Candidata/candidatus theologiae	7
6.2	Bachelor degree (Bachelorgrad) Diploma for general teacher education programme (Vitnemål fra allmennlærerutdanning, Vitnemål fra grunnskolelærerutdanning)	6
6.1	University college degree (Høgskolekandidatgrad)	
5.2	Diploma for vocational college education (1.5 to 2 years, 90 - 120 credits) (Vitnemål fra fagskoleutdanning)	5
5.1	Diploma for vocational college education 0.5 to 1.5 years, 30 - 90 credits) (Vitnemål fra fagskoleutdanning)	
4	A. Certificate for upper secondary vocational education and training (Vitnemål fra videregående opplæring, yrkesfaglige utdanningsprogram) Craft certificate (Fagbrev) Journeyman certificate (Svennebrev) B. Certificate for upper secondary general education (Vitnemål fra videregående opplæring, studieforberedende utdanningsprogram)	4
3	Document of competence for partially completed upper secondary education (Kompetansebevis)	3
2	Certificate for primary and lower secondary education (10 years) (Vitnemål fra 10-årig grunnskole)	2
1	Not part of the NQF/ no qualifications at this level	1

Acronyms

EEA	European economic area
EQF	European qualifications framework
EU	European Union
NKR	Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring [national qualifications framework for lifelong learning]
NOKUT	<i>Nasjonalt kompetansesenter for utenlandsk utdanning</i> [Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training
VPL	validation of prior learning

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Notes

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<https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2017-11-08-1846>
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Related content



2018

Norway - European inventory on NQF 2018

European inventory of NQF

 Norway