

NQF state of play

 **Switzerland 2024**

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Overview

Stage of development: [Operational stage](#)

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

NQF for vocational and professional qualifications (NQF-VPQ) and NQF for higher education (nqf.ch-HS).

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Ordinance on the NQF for vocational and professional qualifications (NQF-VPQ) (2014)

[\(in German\)](#)

[\(in French\)](#)

Adoption of the qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area (nqf.ch-HS) (2009)

[\(in French\)](#)

[\(in German\)](#)

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

[The List of assigned vocational and professional qualifications \(July 2025\)](#)

[A database of all state-recognised occupations and professions](#)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

In 2023 the public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) was 5.6%, above the EU-27 average, which for the same year was 4.7% ([1]). In 2023, the percentage of tertiary education attainment (age 25-34) was 51.9%, above the EU-27 average, which for the same year was 43.1% ([2]). The participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) was 61.6% in 2022, above the EU average, which for the same year was 49.0% ([3]). In 2023 the share of early leavers from education and training (aged 18-24) was 5.7%, well below than the EU average which was 9.5% ([4]). Finally, the adult participation in learning was 27.4%, well above the EU average, which for 2023 was 12.8% ([5]).

The country considers the link to the EQF and the QF-EHEA an opportunity to strengthen the transparency and comparability of its national qualifications in a European and wider international context.

Swiss vocational and professional qualifications enjoy 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, 2024). However, many of its qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, potentially hindering Swiss citizens from seeking employment abroad.

1.2. NQF legal basis

The NQF-VPQ is legally embedded by the Regulation on the NQF for Vocational Education and Training (VET) Qualifications, in force since 1 October 2014 ([6]). The responsibilities of bodies involved in referencing and implementing the framework are clearly defined in Annex 6.3 to that regulation and the explanatory note to the regulation (Chapter 5).

Policy objectives

The NQF-VPQ aims to improve the transparency and comparability of vocational and professional qualifications. More specific objectives are to:

- a. promote equal recognition and valuing of vocational and professional education and training in society in comparison with academic qualifications;
- b. aid employers' understanding of the competences of graduates of vocational and professional courses and of graduates from other countries, to meet the needs of the labour market;
- c. strengthen, as part of an overall strategy, the recognition of higher vocational and professional education and training;
- d. improve the opportunities for Swiss-educated professionals to get jobs abroad and so to increase overall mobility (SERI, 2015).

The main objective of the nqf.ch-HS is to promote the comparability of higher education qualifications in an international context.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The level descriptors of the NQF-VPQ reflect the competence approach ([7]) already used in vocational and professional education and training. The main elements of the descriptors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main elements of the NQF-VPQ descriptors

Knowledge	Knowledge Understanding
Skills	Procedural skills Sensorimotor skills
Competences	Professional competences Personal competences: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• autonomy• social competences• leadership competences

Source: Government of Switzerland (2014); SERI (2015).

It is emphasised that the descriptors are defined specifically in relation to 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' relates 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.

The nqf.ch-HS adopted the Dublin Descriptors used in the QF-EHEA to define the levels of study. These descriptors set the minimum

requirements and outline learning outcomes in five categories: knowledge and understanding; application of knowledge and understanding; ability to form judgments; communication skills and independent learning skills. These categories ensure that students develop a comprehensive set of skills and competencies at each educational level, regardless of their field of study ([8]).

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

NQF-VPQ levels 3 to 5 are open to the various VET qualifications; there are no plans to assign any VET qualifications to levels 1 and 2 ([9]). General education at the upper-secondary level, which is managed by the cantons (including baccalaureate schools and upper-secondary specialized schools), is also excluded (SERI, 2015). Level 5 is only used for professional qualifications in Switzerland. Professional qualifications cannot be assigned to the QF-EHEA. The Dublin Descriptors are formulated for an academic, science-based education. Higher education qualifications are assigned to levels 6 to 8 ([10]).

A total of 590 formal vocational and professional qualifications have been levelled to the framework; 264 initial VET qualifications and 326 tertiary professional qualifications (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). The total number has slightly increased since 2020; the process is expected to continue. Qualifications acquired through non-formal education, including continuing VET (CVET), are not integrated into the NQF-VPQ (Luomi-Messerer, 2024).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

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 the documents are already described in terms of competences or are planned for revision. If a VET qualification is not described in terms of competences, it must have undergone revision before it can be assigned an NQF-VPQ level (SERI, 2015).

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

3.4. Quality assurance arrangements

Quality assurance of vocational and professional qualifications has been incorporated into law by the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training ([11]) and corresponding ordinances at all levels.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) ([12]) oversees the implementation of the NQF-VPQ. SERI plays a key role in coordinating and quality assuring the entire levelling/assignment process from proposal until publication of the level of a qualification. SERI is also the EQF national contact point. It provides all necessary information to awarding bodies and other stakeholders and assists in the levelling of qualifications. Guidelines are available ([13]) (SERI, 2015) that describe in detail individual steps and responsibilities in relation to the assignment of qualifications to the NQF-VPQ.

The Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training supports the implementation of the NQF-VPQ, with consistency checks and reviews of the proposed levels of qualifications in line with the methodology and guidelines.

Before the final decision on a level is made, SERI consults the [Tripartite Conference on Vocational and Professional Education and Training](#) twice a year. In the daily running of the NQF-VPQ, there is close cooperation with professional organisations, which play an active role in levelling their diplomas (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

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

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

The organisation and decision-making responsibilities in the Swiss education system are complex and translate into a variety of approaches and projects in the field of validation. Nevertheless, 'Essentially, validation procedures are integrated within each education and training sector' (Salini et al., 2019). SERI coordinates validation projects throughout the country, supporting or checking pilot projects in cooperation with specific services and stakeholders (Salini et al., 2019; SERI, 2024).

Individuals holding occupation-specific competences can gain credit for them as already acquired educational achievements. This recognition process must be completed before the start of the VET programme, as it may influence the possible pathways to a VET qualification. Once the educational achievement has been awarded, the candidate must complete a qualification procedure by taking examinations. The recognition of educational achievements is regulated in VET legislation and is available for all VET programmes.

In VET it is also possible to take part in the validation procedure, in which candidates prove that they have all the required competences. At the end of this procedure, candidates are awarded a vocational qualification without taking a final examination. A total of 15 initial VET qualifications (out of 230 different occupations in IVET) are accessible through validation, in various cantons, although the possibility of validation varies from canton to canton, as each decides independently which IVET diplomas can be offered in this way. IVET is the only sector within the Swiss education and training system where validation is regulated at the national level (Luomi-Messerer, 2024).

In higher education, regulation is normally decentralised to the institutional level; depending on the type of university (cantonal universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education), procedures and regulations might differ. Some universities offer the possibility of admission without an upper leaving certificate/maturity certificate or the validation of previous credits

towards a degree ([14]).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The NQF-VPQ can be considered to have reached operational stage, given that a significant proportion of existing vocational and professional qualifications have been included.

6.2. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

When a professional organisation develops or manages a qualification, one of its responsibilities is ensuring the qualification is properly referenced within the NQF VPQ ([15]). However, referencing is voluntary; there is no obligation ([16]).

The process begins when the professional organisation decides to reference a qualification. To do so, it submits a formal application to SERI, which oversees the referencing process. The organisation has two main pathways to choose from: simplified referencing or individual referencing.

Most organisations opt for simplified referencing. Over time, it has become clear that many qualifications of the same type tend to fall into the same level of the framework. This insight allows for a quicker and more streamlined process. SERI has established standard reference levels for common qualification types—for example:

- a. a Federal Certificate of Vocational Education and Training from a two-year VET programme is usually assigned to level 3;
- b. a Federal Diploma of Vocational Education and Training, often from a three- or four-year programme, typically sits at level 4;
- c. higher-level qualifications, like the Federal Diploma of Higher Education and Advanced Federal Diplomas, are assigned to levels 5 or 6, depending on their structure and depth.

In the simplified process, the organisation applies using the standard level proposed by SERI for the qualification type.

For qualifications that don't quite fit the standard levels or if the organisation believes the qualification warrants a higher level a more detailed process, known as individual referencing, is available. This route requires more in-depth justification and evidence. The process considers, amongst others, the learning outcomes and specific aspects of each profession and follows the procedures outlined in the official Guidelines

on the NQF VPQ.

Once the referencing process is complete, the qualification is added to the official NQF VPQ list, which is published twice a year—on 1 January and 1 July. For inclusion in the January list, applications must be submitted by 1 September of the previous year. For inclusion in the July list, the deadline is 1 March.

Higher education qualifications such as bachelor, master and doctorate degrees, awarded by institutions which are accredited according to the [Swiss Higher Education Act](#) (HEdA), are automatically referenced to the respective levels 1 to 3 of the nqf.ch-HS ([17]). Individual referencing of programmes is not necessary ([18]).

6.3. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

NQF-VPQ and EQF levels are indicated on Europass supplements for VET qualifications at levels 3 to 5. They are also indicated on the diploma supplements for tertiary professional qualifications for levels 5 to 8 (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. NQF dissemination

The NQF-VPQ has a website ([19]) to spread knowledge about the framework. Tools have also been developed for professional organisations wishing to include their qualifications ([20]). The framework has been promoted mostly through professional organisations and sectors.

6.5. Qualifications databases and registers

The SERI professional directory contains all formal VET and professional education qualifications, regardless of whether they are levelled to the NQF-VPQ or not ([21]). Since the end of 2022, it has indicated the NQF-VPQ levels of qualifications included in the framework. The directorate contains a total of 953 qualifications, providing information on the field of study, awarding body and intended learning outcomes, in the form of open text and a link to relevant supplements. Learning outcomes for all qualifications included in the NQF-VPQ are also described in the supplements available in the database for download (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

SERI maintains a list of qualifications that have been referenced to the NQF-VPQ. It updates this list twice each year, in January and July. The NQF-VPQ level assigned to a given qualification becomes official as soon as it has been added to this list ([22]).

6.6. Impact of the NQF

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

The nqf.ch-HS supports the implementation of the Bologna process goals. Higher education institutes are guided by the descriptors of the nqf.ch-HS when developing programmes ([23]). Additionally, it enhances information about the Swiss higher education system, especially regarding teaching, and facilitates the comparability of qualifications within Europe, thereby improving transparency (Luomi-Messerer, 2024).

Referencing to the EQF

The NQF-VPQ was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (SERI, 2015).

Important lessons and future plans

The country has established two sectoral qualifications frameworks: one encompassing vocational and professional education (NQF-VPQ) and a separate one for higher education (nqf.ch-HS). The alignment of each framework to the respective overarching European qualifications framework indirectly makes their systemic complementarity transparent (SERI, 2015).

The main goal of the introduction of the NQF-VPQ has been for it to act as a transparency tool. An important challenge is that many Swiss VET and professional education qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, which can hinder Swiss citizens seeking employment abroad. Therefore, Switzerland views the connection to European cooperation on qualifications frameworks (both the EQF, and the QF-EHEA) as an opportunity to enhance the transparency and comparability of its national qualifications in a European and broader international context (Luomi-Messerer, 2024).

With the NQF-VPQ established in the education system, the plan is to focus on levelling qualifications.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 7/4/2025]

[Database](#) of all state-recognised occupations and professions.

[List](#) of referenced vocational and professional qualifications.

NQF-VPQ [website](#).

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation ([SERI](#)).

SERI. (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*.

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) (Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung))	8
7	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) (Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung))	7
6	<p>Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) (Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)) SERI proposed standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.</p> <p>Advanced federal diploma of higher education issued by a college of higher education (Diplom HF ausgestellt von einer Höheren Fachschule) SERI proposed standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.</p> <p>Federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) (Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung))</p>	6
5	<p>Federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) (Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung)) SERI proposed standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.</p> <p>Federal VET diploma (3- and 4-year dual VET programmes) (Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung))</p>	5

4	Federal VET diploma (3- and 4-year dual VET programmes) (Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung)) SERI proposed standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.	4
3	Federal VET certificate (2-year VET programmes) (Eidgenössisches Berufsattest (zweijährige duale Berufsausbildung)) SERI proposed standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.	3
2	(not available)	2
1	(not available)	1

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NQF	national qualifications framework
Nqf.ch- HS	<i>Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich</i> [Qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area]
NQF- VPQ	<i>Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung</i> [National qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training]
QF- EHEA	qualifications framework of the European higher education area
SERI	<i>Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation</i> [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation]
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 6/4/2025]

European Commission & Cedefop. (2022). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].

Government of Switzerland. (2014). *Verordnung über den nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung V-NQR-BB* [Regulation on the NQF for VET qualifications].

Luomi- Messerer, K. (2024). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informallearning 2023 update: Switzerland*. European Commission & Cedefop.

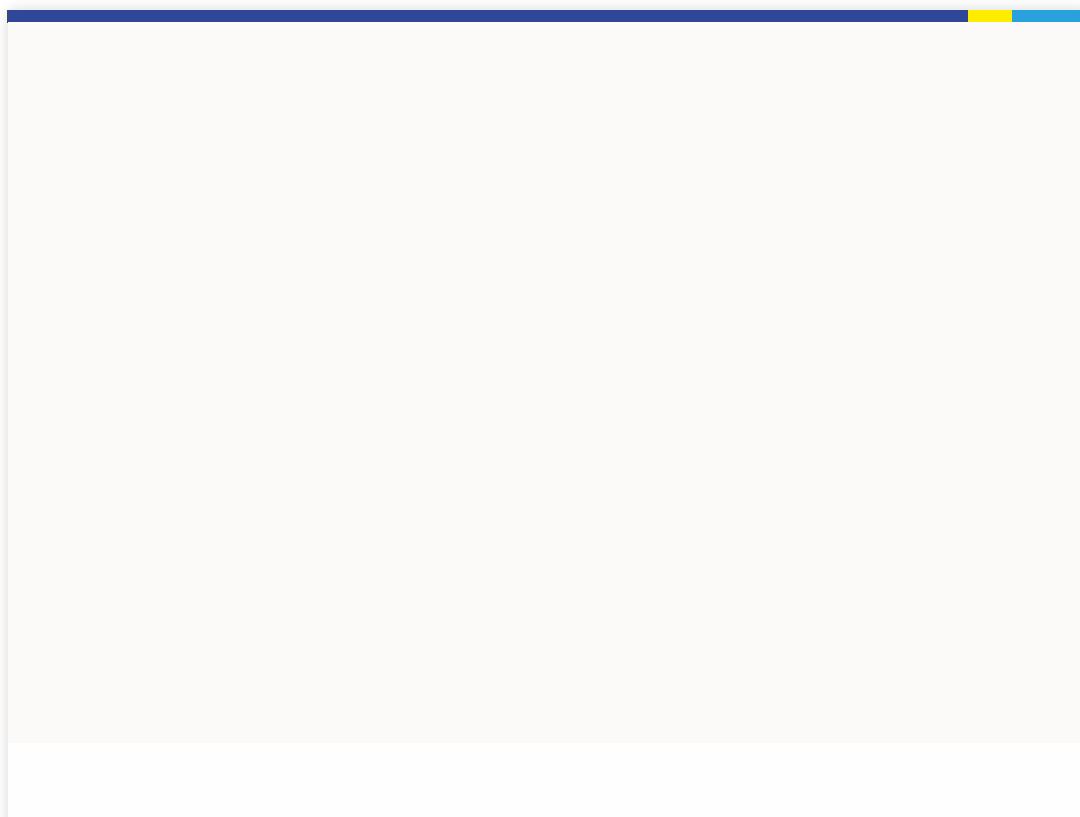
Salini, D.; Weber Guisan, S. and Tsandev, E. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Switzerland*.

SERI. (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*.

SERI. (2024). *Swiss VPET System - A Brief Guide*.

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