

# European Inventory on NQF 2012

## AUSTRIA

### Introduction

Austria has designed a comprehensive national qualifications framework, which will be implemented gradually, through a step-by-step approach. Currently, the NQF includes qualifications awarded in higher education, selected 'reference qualifications' from VET and a qualification from a prevocational programme. This selection of 'reference qualifications' serves an illustrative purpose and does not include any qualifications from general education. The decision on how to include qualifications such as the *Reifeprüfung* certificate from AHS schools (upper secondary school leaving certificate from general education) into the NQF still needs to be taken.

The NQF has been under development since January 2007. The first 'fact-finding phase' (February to October 2007) was supported by a broad consultation process. Its outcomes fed into a report (*Konsolidierung der Stellungnahme zum Konsultationspapier*), which identified a number of open questions ( <sup>1</sup>) and was used by the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research to prepare a policy paper (October 2009 ( <sup>2</sup>)), outlining the strategy for implementing the NQF. With the adoption of the NQF position paper by the Council of Ministers in late 2009, the Austrian NQF was officially launched. A research-based approach and a broad range of stakeholders involved in the development are key characteristics of NQF development.

Another is that levels 6-8 are open to VET qualifications acquired outside the Bologna strand. A 'Y-structure' was adopted, allowing for two sets of descriptors (for higher education and VET) to coexist at these levels ( <sup>3</sup>). Dublin descriptors are used for qualifications related to Bologna cycles (BA, MA, Doctorate) and awarded by higher education institutions (i.e. universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) and university colleges for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). VET qualifications and qualifications from adult learning ('non-Bologna' strand) will be allocated based on NQF descriptors and additional criteria.

Responsibilities for design and award of qualifications are allocated to different stakeholders and providers. A step-by step implementation strategy was adopted to ensure a comprehensive NQF. The overall process was structured into three corridors: corridor one

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(<sup>1</sup>) All documents are available on the Internet site of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/eubildung/nqr/nqr\\_sn.xml](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/eubildung/nqr/nqr_sn.xml) [accessed 7.7.2012] or Federal Ministry of Science and Research <http://www.bmwf.gv.at/wissenschaft/national/nqr/> [accessed 7.7.2012].

(<sup>2</sup>) *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich – Schlussfolgerungen, Grundsatzentscheidungen und Maßnahmen nach Abschluss des NQR-Konsultationsverfahrens*, prepared by the NQF project group of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2009 [unpublished].

(<sup>3</sup>) *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich*, p. 7 [unpublished].

aims to assign qualifications from the formal education system, based on national legislation and awarded by the State; corridor two focuses on the assignment of qualifications from the non-formal sector (e.g. occupation-specific and company based CVET); and corridor three aims to develop approaches to validating learning outcomes acquired through informal learning. One of the main issues to be resolved within corridor one is inclusion of general education and the respective school leaving certificates in the NQF.

## Main policy objectives

The main objective of the NQF is to map all officially recognised national qualifications, present them in relation to each other, and to make implicit levels of the qualification system explicit, nationally as well as internationally. It will have no regulatory functions. The specific objectives of NQF are to:

- assist referencing of Austrian qualifications to the EQF and thus strengthen understanding of these qualifications internationally;
- make qualifications easier to understand and compare for Austrian citizens;
- improve permeability between VET and higher education by developing new pathways and opening new progression possibilities;
- reinforce the use of learning outcomes in standard-setting, curricula and assessment;
- support lifelong learning and enable stronger links between adult learning and formal education and training;
- recognise a broader range of learning forms (including non-formal and informal learning).

The NQF plays an important part in implementing a strategy of lifelong learning (BMUKK, 2011) <sup>(4)</sup> that includes and assigns to all contexts of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) the same value (European Commission et al., 2010, Austria) <sup>(5)</sup>. Some suggestions have been made on how to include non-formal qualifications in the NQF, for example by setting up 'bodies responsible for qualifications' <sup>(6)</sup>. This issue is still under discussion. Methodologies and responsibilities are being developed for linking validation and allocation of non-formal qualifications to the NQF. This marks an important stepping stone towards an inclusive NQF.

One of the objectives of the NQF is to strengthen the linkages between different subsystems by making apparent existing pathways/developing new pathways and opening up new progression possibilities: improved counselling is an important element of this. Austria has a relatively high share of people with migration background in the labour force and in education. Raising their education outcomes, qualifications levels and increasing

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<sup>(4)</sup> *Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich.*  
[http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/20916/IIIarbeitspapier\\_ebook\\_gross.pdf](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/20916/IIIarbeitspapier_ebook_gross.pdf) [accessed 5.12.2012].

<sup>(5)</sup> *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Austria.*  
<http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77444.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

<sup>(6)</sup> *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich*, p. 11 [unpublished].

equal opportunities remains one of the main policy challenges and is a focus of the current reforms (European Commission, 2011) <sup>(7)</sup>.

## Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

From the beginning, the Austrian approach has been characterised by active stakeholder involvement, but also occasional conflicting views on the role of the NQF. Two ministries, the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research are in charge of the process. However, the General Directorate for Vocational Education and Training of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture is the driving force behind the process. It has initiated and is coordinating NQF development and implementation, cooperating with the Federal Ministry of Science and Research, which is in charge of higher education.

A national NQF steering group was set up in February 2007. This includes 23 members representing all the main stakeholders (all relevant ministries, social partners and *Länder*) responsible for qualifications design and award. The main task of this group is to coordinate the NQF implementation, referencing to the EQF, and ensure that the framework reflects the interests of stakeholders. One important topic of discussion was on opening up levels 6-8 of the NQF for non-traditional higher education qualification, with VET stakeholders on one side and higher education on the other. Consensus was achieved.

The Austrian NQF was formally launched through the adoption of the position paper by the Councils of Ministers in 2009. Three sets of criteria for linking qualifications to the NQF levels have been developed:

- (a) qualifications must meet existing formal requirements (for example related to assessment procedures and proof of qualification);
- (b) the assignment of a qualification to a level is made on the basis of the level descriptors;
- (c) a detailed description of the qualification, using an agreed template, has to be submitted (including qualitative and quantitative data about the qualification).

Based on this classification, a final decision is made on levelling <sup>(8)</sup>. Submission for registration is, however, voluntary. Allocation criteria and procedures were tested intensively in 2011 but those for allocation did not yield the expected results. A revised model is now being discussed which will clarify procedures, competent bodies and their responsibilities <sup>(9)</sup>.

Currently, the NCP's main role is to support the development and implementation of the NQF in Austria, develop an NQF information system, including NQF register, and become

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<sup>(7)</sup> *Analysis of the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020): country analysis*, p.4. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/joint11/wp2\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/joint11/wp2_en.pdf) [accessed 10.8.2012].

<sup>(8)</sup> Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2012). *Austrian EQF referencing report Annex 4: manual for including formal qualifications in the national qualifications framework (NQF): criteria*. January 2011.

<sup>(9)</sup> Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2012). *Austrian EQF referencing report – Supplementary information* [unpublished].

the main information desk for citizens and institutions. It is envisaged to create a legal basis for the NQF, which will clarify responsibilities and allocation procedures.

## Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NQF has eight levels. The decision on number of levels was based on the broad consultation process and a study, providing information on an existing implicit hierarchy in the national qualification system, using statistical educational research and statistical frameworks (EQF Ref, 2011, p. 46) <sup>(10)</sup>. Level descriptors are defined as knowledge, skills and competence. Reference qualifications are used to illustrate the level of learning outcomes.

Through the implementation of the NQF, Austria is strengthening the learning outcome approach across education and training: this is seen as central to the positioning of qualifications onto the NQF. Many qualifications are already learning outcome oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions. Several initiatives are supposed to strengthen learning outcomes orientation.

In 2005, the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture launched a project to develop educational standards for core subject areas in general education (Hubert et al., 2006) <sup>(11)</sup> and in VET <sup>(12)</sup>. Educational standards for VET schools and colleges define 'content' (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), 'action' (cognitive achievements required in the particular subjects), and personal and social competences related to the specific field.

In March 2009, the General Directorate for VET of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture started a project (curriculum design – learning outcomes orientation) which aims to integrate educational standards in VET curricula. In addition, Austria is preparing a competence-oriented and standardised '*Reifeprüfung*' to be administered in general and vocational upper secondary education.

In apprenticeship (dual system), a training regulation is issued for each profile by the Federal Ministry of Economics. It consists of the occupational competence profile (*Berufsprofil*) with related activities and work descriptions, and job profile (*Berufsbild*) with knowledge and skills to be acquired by apprentices.

In higher education a qualification profile, describing the expected learning outcomes (and definitions of learning outcomes) for each module, was introduced by the University Act (*Universitätsgesetz*) in 2002, but implementation differs across higher education institutions.

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<sup>(10)</sup> *EQF referencing process and report*, p. 46.  
[http://www.eqf-ref.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=6](http://www.eqf-ref.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=6) [accessed 5.12.2012].

<sup>(11)</sup> *Bildungsstandards in Deutschland, Österreich, England, Australien, Neuseeland und Südostasien* (2006). [http://www.edudoc.ch/static/web/arbeiten/harmos/lit\\_analyse\\_1.pdf](http://www.edudoc.ch/static/web/arbeiten/harmos/lit_analyse_1.pdf) [accessed 5.12.2012]. For development of educational standards in Austria you can also consult the website of the BIFIE <https://www.bifie.at/downloads> [accessed 5.12.2012].

<sup>(12)</sup> <http://www.berufsbildendeschulen.at/de/downloads.html> [accessed 5.12.2012].

## Links to other instruments and policies

Austria is preparing for participation in the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) by conducting studies and participating in international projects. The current strategy foresees using ECVET to support transnational mobility. It is not planned to link the NQF with the credit system (Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012) <sup>(13)</sup>. The European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) has been implemented in higher education.

Austria is also active in the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation. The Ministry of Education has introduced a comprehensive quality management system through the VET quality initiative (QIBB) in which nearly all Austrian VET schools and colleges participate (on a voluntary basis). This approach links results/standards with input/process dimensions. The initiative is in line with the main objectives, guiding principles and priorities of the EQAVET recommendation.

The NQF policy paper and the recently adopted strategy for lifelong learning (BMUKK, 2011) <sup>(14)</sup> place high importance on general demand for integrating non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes in the NQF. Work to develop strategies and tools to include non-formally acquired qualifications and learning outcomes developed through informal learning is continuing. A working group is currently elaborating procedures for including learning outcomes acquired outside formal education. Proposals are already available, but no decisions have been taken yet. Social partners, who are also owners of the main adult training providers, play an important role.

## Referencing to the EQF

Austria referenced its national qualifications levels to the EQF and self-certified to QF-EHEA in June 2012, preparing one comprehensive report.

Table **Level correspondence established between the Austrian qualifications framework and the EQF**

<b>NQF</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>EQF</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

<sup>(13)</sup> *Austrian EQF referencing report*, p. 109.

[http://www.oead.at/fileadmin/III/dateien/lebenslanges\\_lernen\\_pdf\\_word\\_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/Austrian\\_EQF\\_Referencing\\_Report.pdf](http://www.oead.at/fileadmin/III/dateien/lebenslanges_lernen_pdf_word_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/Austrian_EQF_Referencing_Report.pdf) [accessed 26.11.2012].

<sup>(14)</sup> *Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich*.

[http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/20916/IIIarbeitspapier\\_ebook\\_gross.pdf](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/20916/IIIarbeitspapier_ebook_gross.pdf) [accessed 26.11.2012].

## Important lessons and future plans

First, one strength of Austrian NQF development is the involvement and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, representing all subsystems of education and training as well as the social partners. This broad process has made it clear that stakeholders hold different and sometimes conflicting views on the role of the NQF.

Second, Austria sees the NQF as a translation device to make qualifications transparent and comparable as well as a tool to improve validation of non-formal learning. It will not have regulatory functions. Implementing the NQF is closely related to strengthening the learning outcomes orientation in education and training, e.g. by revising VET curricula. NQF levels will also be explicitly mentioned in curricula and training profiles.

Third, the NQF has been designed to be comprehensive. This is underlined by the following principles: the adopted Y-structure of the NQF; the working structure of three corridors (see above); the long-term inclusion of general education; and methodologies being developed for inclusion of non-formal and informal learning (Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012) <sup>(15)</sup>.

### Main sources of information

The Austrian NCP was set up as an organisational entity at OeAD (*Österreichischer Austauschdienst*, Austrian agency for international cooperation in education and research). <http://www.oead.at/nqr> [accessed 12.3.2013].

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<sup>(15)</sup> *Austrian EQF referencing report. Supplementary information* [unpublished].