

European Inventory on NQF 2012

FINLAND

Introduction

The work on the Finnish national qualifications framework started in August 2008. A national committee comprising all main stakeholders presented a first proposal in June 2009. Following two public consultations in 2009 and 2010, the government presented a proposal to the Finnish Parliament autumn 2010. According to this, the Finnish NQF will cover officially recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training and higher education) at all levels, and can be described as comprehensive. The framework is also intended to (gradually) open up towards competences acquired outside the existing formal qualifications system, for example linked to continuing training in the labour market.

Following the 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). In its proposal the government expects the act to be in force by 1 January 2013, though this presupposes it's passing by the Parliament before the end of 2012.

A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed in 2005 but has not been taken forward separately and will form an integrated part of the NQF. Finland has decided to carry out the referencing to the EQF and the self-certification to the European higher education area as one process.

Main policy objectives

The work on the Finnish NQF was directly triggered by the launch of the debate on the EQF in 2004-05. While Finnish stakeholders supported the idea of a European reference framework, they originally saw little added value from an NQF in Finland, pointing to the transparent character of the existing education and training system and what was seen as relatively limited further benefit of a framework. This scepticism has largely been replaced by agreement that the framework has a long-term role to play in helping to increase international transparency and to improve the effectiveness and clarity of the qualifications system.

Transparency and comparability of qualifications, at national and European level, are core objectives of the NQF. This is to be achieved by describing all existing qualifications in a coherent way and by using a consistent conceptual approach. This will illustrate the relationship between different qualifications and clarify how individuals can make progress within the system and how they can build pathways based on experience and/or on formal learning. Recognition of prior learning is emphasised as an important feature of the NQF and as a necessary element in a strategy for lifelong learning.

Several stakeholders are keen that the framework provide an opportunity to strengthen the overall consistency of the use of learning outcomes across education and different institutions. Explicit level descriptors may help to clarify what is expected from a qualification and can improve the overall quality of Finnish education and training.

As well as officially recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training, and higher education) at all levels, the framework will also cover official qualifications awarded outside the remit of the Ministry of Education and Culture, for example related to the armed services, police, and prison and rescue services.

The framework introduces the concept of 'extensive competence modules' to be able to address acquired learning outcomes that are not part of the existing qualifications system. These competence modules cover a broad area and occur in many professions and at all levels. The government proposal distinguishes between two main areas where these 'modules' will be relevant:

- in regulated professions, where legal requirements for certifications beyond initial education and training exist. This is the case for professions in the health and social sectors but is also the case for teachers, diverse and various groups within the construction sector;
- in all areas where there is need for increased competences and specialisations beyond initial education and training. The NQF proposal refers to the need to improve the visibility and valuing of 'specialisations' beyond initial education and training. These specialisations form a significant part of the existing Finnish lifelong learning landscape (in vocational training, higher education and in liberal adult education).

By gradually including certificates and qualifications operating outside initial education and training, the hope is to improve their visibility and improve conditions for lifelong learning. The plan is that these 'extensive competence modules' will be covered only gradually by the framework and it remains to be seen how this will be dealt with in practice, not least with respect to quality assurance arrangements.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

Development of the Finnish NQF has involved a broad range of stakeholders. While initiated and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the working group responsible for preparing the NQF proposal consisted of the following: The Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Defence Command Finland (Ministry of Defence), Finnish National Board of Education, Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (AKAVA), Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK), the Association of Vocational Adult Education Centres (AKKL), Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE), Vocational Education Providers in Finland (KJY), Finnish Association of Principals, The Finnish Council of University Rectors, Finnish Adult Education

Association, The National Union of University Students in Finland and the Union of Finnish Upper Secondary Students.

The range of stakeholders included in the working groups signals an inclusive approach seeking as strong ownership as possible from the start. This approach was further strengthened by carrying out wide-ranging consultation in autumn 2009. Of the approximately 90 proposals received, none questioned the idea of developing and implementing an NQF. A second consultation on the government proposal for national legislation was organised in summer 2010, after which changes were made to the level descriptors.

Higher education institutions have supported the development of the NQF 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 seem to operate more smoothly than in many other countries. This may be explained by the role played by non-university higher education (promoting professional training at bachelor and master level) and by the increasingly important competence-based qualifications approach applied for vocational qualifications at levels corresponding to 4 and 5 of the EQF. This approach, gradually developed since the 1990s, is based on the principle that candidates without a formal training background can be assessed for a qualification. Finnish VET qualifications also give access to all forms of higher education. 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 NQF.

The change of government in 2011, and the subsequent resubmission of the proposal to Parliament, was not accompanied by further consultations. The main changes to the proposal are linked to the levelling of particular qualifications, the original and somewhat controversial proposal to place some specialist vocational training qualifications, including one for riding teachers, at level 6 have been removed.

The delays experienced during 2011 and 2012 have partly reduced the overall attention to the framework and its potential role. Whether this will harm the implementation of the framework in the long term remains to be seen.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

Broad acceptance of the competence-based approach underpins Finnish NQF developments and the relatively lack of conflict over linking general, vocational and higher education qualifications.

The government proposal now being discussed by Parliament introduces an eight-level framework reflecting (but slightly adjusting) the knowledge, skills and competence components introduced by the EQF⁽¹⁾. The descriptors have been inspired by the EQF but adopted to suit the national context; this is particularly so for competence, where additional aspects like entrepreneurship and languages have been added. This may help strengthen

⁽¹⁾ See proposed level descriptors in Annex 3.

the dimensions of key-competences and lifelong learning. Including the aspect ‘evaluation’ specifies that individuals must be able to reflect on their knowledge, skills and competences and to judge how to improve them. The descriptors for levels 6 to 8 use the same basic approach but also largely reflect the descriptors of the earlier proposal for higher education qualifications framework. Table 9 shows the components used to define and describe levels in the Finnish NQF.

Table 1 **Level descriptors in the Finnish NQF**

Knowledge	Levels 1-8
Work method and application (skills)	
Responsibility, management and entrepreneurship	
Evaluation	
Key skills for lifelong learning	

The level descriptors in the government proposal do not distinguish explicitly between the different dimensions of learning outcomes (KSC), even if they have been identified in preparatory work. The aim was to create a holistic description for each level.

The background document for the government proposal illustrates the main principles for placing qualifications at particular levels, and how the learning outcomes approach has been applied. Qualifications of the same type have been placed at the same level. This applies also to vocational qualifications (levels 4 and 5). To ensure the clarity of the education and qualifications system, all qualifications of a certain type would normally be placed at the same level in the framework, but some exceptions have been identified. Individual VET qualifications may be placed at one level higher than the basic qualification if the requirement level clearly differs from other qualifications of the same type, as is the case, for example, for vocational qualifications in construction (speciality in production). This is important as it signals a willingness to use the learning outcomes approach actively and an acknowledgement that this may lead to different level placement within one group or qualifications.

While creating no controversy at national level, the placing of the basic education syllabus at level 3 of the NQF has triggered an intense discussion with the four other Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Denmark and Iceland, both considering their primary and (lower) secondary education to be at level 2, fear that the Finnish approach inflates this particular qualification and may create artificial barriers between the Nordic countries, obscuring existing and de facto similarities. The Swedish and Norwegian positions on levelling for primary and (lower) secondary education have been influenced by the Finnish proposal, and both may decide to go for level 3.

Links to other instruments and policies

The government proposal emphasises the role of the NQF in further promoting the use of learning outcomes for describing expectations to individuals and for improving the quality and consistency of the education and training provisions and institutions themselves. In this sense the NQF is seen as a tool for promoting lifelong and life-wide learning. While not explicitly addressing the link between the NQF and validation, the priority given to learning outcomes can be seen as a precondition for further developing arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

According to the European inventory on validation (European Commission et al., 2010, Finland) ⁽²⁾, validation is benefitting a growing number of adults, with the system of competence-based qualifications of particular importance. The number of beneficiaries has increased from around 5 000 adults in 1997 to over 65 000 in 2008. In recent years, the number of participants has increased at an annual rate of around 2% to 20%. Validation is also used in all other parts of education and training but statistics are generally more unreliable; in some cases, for example HE, it is not registered to what extent validation has played a role when acquiring a qualification.

So far, no common standards or requirement have been introduced for validation that would include all different levels of education (Cedefop, 2010b) ⁽³⁾. The National Board of Education has drafted national qualification requirements for each competence-based qualification ⁽⁴⁾. The documents specify areas of assessment and standards/criteria for passing/failing. Such requirements are legally binding and therefore guide validation work carried out at the provider level by the tripartite assessment teams. In terms of higher education, the laws and decrees regulate higher education and no standards exist as such. In 2009 the Finnish Council of University Rectors and the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences also issued recommendations on validating informal and non-formal learning in Finnish higher education.

Finland has been actively involved in testing ECVET. Referred to as FINECVET, a national project piloting the ECVET system, these developments have so far been carried out separately from the development of the NQF and there is no indication in the government proposal on how to establish links to ECVET.

⁽²⁾ European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report Finland. <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77460.pdf> [accessed 26.11.2012].

⁽³⁾ The development of national qualifications framework in Europe, August 2010. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6108_en.pdf [accessed 5.12.2012].

⁽⁴⁾ The Finnish National Board of Education decides on the national core curriculum for each vocational qualification, determining the composition of studies and the objectives, core contents and assessment criteria of the study units. Preparation is carried out by tripartite expert groups and they are also discussed in education committees for each sector and qualification committees.

Referencing to the EQF

The Finnish national coordination point for EQF (which is the National Board of Education) was appointed in June 2008, before the work on the NQF started. Preparations for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF have been going on in parallel to the work on the NQF proposal itself. Due to the delays encountered during 2011 and 2012, EQF referencing has been repeatedly postponed and will take place – given a decision by the Parliament – in spring 2013.

Important lessons and the way forward

This Finnish NQF may become a tool for long-term development. The introduction of learning outcomes based levels is seen by stakeholders as an instrument for increasing qualifications consistency in Finland. While learning outcomes are used widely in almost all education and training sectors, their interpretation varies, thus risking inconsistencies between institutions and sectors. The NQF is seen as something more than just an instrument for transparency; this transparency should be used as a reference point for improving the overall quality and relevance of Finnish qualifications.

The success of the Finnish NQF will depend on the extent to which it becomes an instrument for gradual improvement of qualifications at all levels, including the local and institutional. Will it, for example, become a reference point for assessment and validation practitioners; will it become a reference point for curriculum development; and will it influence the overall debate on quality assurance in education and training?

The delays encountered during 2011 and 2012 may have resulted in a loss of momentum at national level. The moment a decision from the Parliament exists, it will be important to restart the dialogue between stakeholders and invite them to influence the creation of an operational NQF. Without such renewed involvement and engagement there is a risk that the relevance of the Finnish framework for long-term developments will be reduced.

Main sources of information

Finnish Ministry of Education. <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/?lang=en> [accessed 6.12.2012].
Finnish National Board of Education acts as NCP.
<http://www.oph.fi/qualificationsframework> [accessed 6.12.2012].