

European Inventory on NQF 2012

ICELAND

Introduction

Iceland is currently developing a national framework (ISQF) covering all levels and types of qualification. The framework will consist of seven learning outcomes based levels. Work started in 2006 and has been closely linked to the reform of the entire Icelandic education training system. While there is currently no single act or decree introducing the ISQF, its role and mandate are explicitly stated through a series of acts and decrees introduced between 2006 and 2012. Starting with the Act on Higher Education and followed by acts on pre-school education, compulsory education, upper secondary education, teacher training and adult education, a sufficiently strong formal basis exists for the framework to be able to move into an early operational stage during 2013. The ISQF is characterised by a clear borderline between levels 1 to 4 and levels 5 to 7. The development of these two parts of the framework has, to some extent, taken place separately and responds to the EQF and Bologna processes respectively (with separate referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA).

Main policy objectives and scope of the framework

The ISQF is defined as a lifelong learning framework and aims to encompass all levels and types of education and training offered in the country, including adult education. The framework starts with, and is anchored to, general reform of Icelandic education and training initiated by the Act on Higher Education, adopted in 2006. While this act referred to the Bologna process and the introduction of a three cycle approach for Icelandic higher education, the acts on upper secondary education in 2008 and on adult education in 2010 address the remaining parts of education and training and point towards a comprehensive national qualifications framework.

The Icelandic NQF – through its systematic application of learning outcomes – is seen as a tool for reviewing the overall functioning of education and training and supporting long-term reform. This is exemplified by the Act on Upper Secondary Education which provides for a new approach to design and construction of study programmes. Education providers will gradually (and to be fully implemented from 2015) enjoy more autonomy in writing curricula in general education and VET. They will do this using an approach combining learning outcomes, workload and credits.

So far, no separate legislative basis has been developed for the ISQF: this has been deemed unnecessary due to the integration of framework developments into the 2006-10 reform. While this provides a strong legislative basis for the different parts of the framework, moving towards a comprehensive framework may be hampered by the fact that levels 1 to 4 and 5 to 7 have been developed in separate and parallel processes.

Stakeholder involvement of and framework implementation

A wide range of stakeholders from education and training, as well as the labour market, has been involved in developing the ISQF. Apart from the political debate surrounding the preparation and passing of the education and training acts (between 2006 and 2010), representative working groups have been active during all stages of the process. Development of framework structures has been combined with extensive efforts to introduce the learning outcomes perspective in curricula and in teaching and learning practices. The following main steps can be identified:

- the Ministry initiated the work on descriptors for lower ISQF levels in 2008 and 2009. Draft qualifications level descriptors were published and representatives of various academic and vocational study programmes, and students, were invited to discuss the proposal. All upper secondary schools in Iceland were invited to discuss the framework and its potential role and function. Between 2009 and 2012 the Ministry of Education (also acting as EQF NCP) has set up more than 20 working groups involving representatives of education and training and occupational sectors. These have played a key role in developing level descriptors and in agreeing on how the different qualifications can best be articulated in terms of learning outcomes and subsequently levelled to the NQF and the EQF;
- active involvement of this broad group of practitioners has significantly contributed to the 'anchoring' of the NQF proposal not only in education and training but also among labour market stakeholders. The new general curriculum guides for pre-schools, compulsory schools and upper secondary (May 2011) can be seen as resulting from this work, as can the new descriptions (standards) for vocational qualifications currently being developed;
- the Icelandic higher education sector started work on linking to the QF-EHEA in 2007, preceding the work on the comprehensive NQF. It is agreed that the three cycles of the higher education framework will provide the three highest levels in the Icelandic NQF. Opening up of these levels to qualifications outside the university system has not yet been discussed;
- the higher education sector has only been partly involved in developing the NQF, the consequence being that the relationship between vocational and academic qualifications (and levels) has not been fully discussed and articulated. The framework has generally been received positively by the different stakeholders. This also applies to teachers and trainers who are actively involved in continuing reforms related to learning outcomes, curricula and key-competences.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

Iceland has decided to introduce a seven-level framework based on knowledge, skills and competence-oriented descriptors. Compared to the EQF, competences are expressed in more detail and reflect the importance attributed to key competences. The development of level descriptors for the ISQF has formed an important part of this overall strategy to shift to

learning outcomes. The NQF descriptors for level 1 to 4 were published in the national curriculum guide for upper secondary school in May 2011. The descriptors for three higher education levels were published in the form of a decree in 2011. Combined, these two-level approaches add up to a seven-level NQF.

The descriptors are increasingly being used to guide initiatives in different parts of education and training. This exemplified by the newly published national curriculum guide for primary schools. Some discussion has taken place on the role of the lower levels of the framework, whether it is sufficiently inclusive and whether it will serve individuals entering the system with few or no formal qualifications. Early proposals included entry levels; these were eventually not included in the proposal.

The shift to learning outcomes is seen as an important part of the reform of Icelandic education and training. A systematic use of learning outcomes, referring to a national set of descriptors, is seen as important for the future design of qualifications.

Links to other instruments and policies

The introduction of a system for recognising non-formal and informal learning is an integrated part of the effort to establish an NQF. The work on validation started in earnest in 2002 and the Ministry of Education has given the Education and Training Service Centre the role of developing a national strategy. This strategy will involve cooperation with lifelong learning centres, upper secondary schools, labour associations and other stakeholders linked to sectors.

The NQF will aid validation by offering increased transparency of qualifications and by introducing a more systematic approach to learning outcomes, thus clarifying the standards to be applied for validation. The existence of explicitly defined levels distinguishing knowledge, skills and competences will make it easier to integrate validation arrangements fully. The potential of assigning courses to levels should also lead to non-formal and informal learning. Validation is explicitly mentioned by the 2008 and 2010 Laws on Upper Secondary and Adult Education, with these arrangements as fully integrated parts of the formal system.

Referencing to the EQF

Preparations for referencing to the EQF have started; it is expected to be completed in 2013. During 2012 it has become clear that the five Nordic countries have different views on where to place primary and (lower) secondary education certificates in their frameworks. While Denmark and Iceland see EQF level 2 as the most appropriate location, Finland and Sweden favour level 3. As these countries have previously considered these qualifications as broadly similar, this has caused concern over the consistency of application of the learning outcomes principle.

Important lessons and the way forward

The ISQF is well linked to overall reform of Icelandic education and training. This may be seen as a strength and has already made it possible for the framework to be used as a tool for supporting continuing reform. A main challenge in the next few years is to continue the process of dialogue and information and gradually increase understanding of the framework, its impact on quality assurance, and how it aids international comparison.

The relationship between levels 1 to 5 and 6 to 8 will require more attention in the coming period. The parallel development of these two segments of the framework will need to be better connected in the next period.

Main sources of information

Information and documents covering the Icelandic developments can be found at <http://namskra.is/> [accessed 7.12.2012] and <http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/Acts> [accessed 7.12.2012].