

European Inventory on NQF 2012

NORWAY

Introduction

Norwegian NQF developments were triggered by the 2008 EQF recommendation and its inclusion into the Treaty of the European Economic Area (EEA) in March 2009. Following extensive preparatory work involving main stakeholders, a comprehensive Norwegian national qualifications framework (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring*, NKR) was adopted through government decision in December 2011 ⁽¹⁾. A specific decree on the role of the NKR within Norwegian education and training will be adopted in 2013, further strengthening the formal basis of the framework. The decree will also clarify the role of the NKR in relation to existing laws on general, vocational, higher and adult education and training.

The NKR consists of seven levels and covers general, vocational and higher education. It is envisaged that, in a second phase, it will be opened to the non-formal and private sector; the procedures and criteria for this have yet to be agreed. The NKR will enter an early operational stage spring 2013, coordinated by the Norwegian coordination point for EQF (hosted by NOKUT, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education).

Norway will present a joint referencing/self-certification report to the EQF/QF-EHEA late spring 2013.

Main policy objectives

The NKR aims at describing the existing national education and training system in a transparent way to make it more understandable, at both national and international level. This should increase mobility, contribute to more flexible learning pathways and promote lifelong learning. The NKR will:

- give a comprehensive and general description of what is expected from a learner after completing a qualification;
- provide an overview of the inner logic of the education and training systems and so support education and career guidance and counselling;
- provide a description which will make possible comparisons with qualifications in other countries;
- provide a better basis for dialogue with the labour market;
- offer the opportunity to develop new instruments for valuing competences acquired outside the formal system.

⁽¹⁾<http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Internasjonalt/UNESCO/NasjonaltKvalifikasjonsrammeverk200612.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

A more systematic use of learning outcomes is seen as a precondition for the NKR. Learning outcomes descriptors are supposed to clarify what is expected from any candidate who has successfully acquired a qualification of any type and at any particular level. This will help to clarify the similarities and differences between qualifications and the relationships between them.

The NKR is not seen as an instrument for reform. While it will describe Norwegian education and training, its intention is not to change it. The NKR is instead seen as:

- an instrument/tool that education and training can use for evaluation and further development;
- a platform for debate and dialogue.

The NKR will, for the moment, only cover qualifications awarded by publicly recognised and accredited education and training institutions. Certificates and diplomas awarded by others, for example in popular education and in enterprises, will not be directly included in the framework. Several stakeholders have criticised the framework for being too narrowly defined and failing to support a broader strategy on competence development and lifelong learning. In response, the Ministry of Education states that potentially incorporating 'other qualifications' will be addressed in a second stage, building on research commissioned in Autumn 2012.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The first phase of NQF development in Norway, from 2006 to 2009, was fragmented, with a series of different initiatives (in higher education, vocational education and training and tertiary VET) in parallel with limited coordination. This changed in 2009 when the Ministry of Education, reflecting input from stakeholders, stated an intention to work towards a comprehensive framework for lifelong learning and to merge existing strands of work into a single approach. The result of this decision was the presentation of the NKR proposal in January 2011, immediately followed by extensive public consultation. This process, involving education and training stakeholders as well as those in the labour market, demonstrated a significantly increased appreciation of the framework's potential for future education, training and labour market policies. In Spring 2012, the proposal for an NQF decree led to another public consultation, demonstrating somewhat different expectations of the future role of the framework. The service employer organisation (in particular) criticised the framework for not being sufficiently accommodating of non-formal training and the private sector, and for being too narrowly oriented towards formal, public education and training. Others, for example the University of Oslo, questioned whether the proposal for a decree could interfere with the institutional autonomy fundamental to this sector?

The NQF for higher education was adopted in 2009 (although not self-certified to the QF-EHEA). The three highest levels of the proposed NKR are identical to the three cycles of the higher education framework, something which will be reflected in the joint referencing/self-certification to take place spring 2013.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NKR adopted in December 2011 introduces a framework of seven levels, reflecting the structure of existing formal education and training in Norway ⁽²⁾. The table below shows this seven-level structure, as well as how main qualification types are expected to be placed (the table shows the situation in September/October 2012, before a final decision on the referencing to the EQF had been made).

While in principle considering of learning outcomes, the splitting of levels 4 to 6 into parallel but distinct categories can be read as a wish to signal differences in institutional types as well as in the duration and workload of qualifications.

Table **Qualifications from formal education placed into the Norwegian qualifications framework**

There are no qualifications corresponding to EQF level 1; this level will not be considered part of the NKR which, for reasons of comparison, starts at level 2.		
Level 2	Completed primary and (lower) secondary education (10 years)	
Level 3	Basic competences acquired through upper secondary education	
Level 4	4A Completed general upper secondary education	4B Completed vocational upper secondary education
Level 5	5.1 Post-secondary VET (Fagskole) 1	5.2 Post-secondary VET (Fagskole) 2
Level 6	Partial Bachelor (short higher education)	Bachelor (Bologna 1st cycle)
Level 7	Master	
Level 8	PhD	

Levels are described through the concepts knowledge (*kunnskap*), skills (*ferdighet*) and general competence (*generell kompetanse*). This approach was already adopted for the higher education framework and seems to be broadly accepted among stakeholders. While the EQF influence is admitted, the main difference lies in the term 'general competence' which refers to the kind of transversal, overarching competences of the learning objectives adopted for upper secondary education (ability to apply knowledge and skills in different situations by demonstrating ability to cooperate, by showing responsibility and ability to reflect, and ability in critical thinking). Using the term 'competence' in isolation would, according to the proposal, lead to confusion.

The three descriptor elements are further specified in the following way:

⁽²⁾ It should be noted that several of these qualifications can also be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning. *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Norway*. <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77474.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

Table **Level descriptors in the Norwegian qualifications framework**

Knowledge	Skills	General competence
Types and complexity: is it theoretical or practical knowledge, within a subject or a profession; how complex and comprehensive	Types: is it cognitive, practical, creative or communicative	Challenges regarding change: in which areas of education and work; how predictable and changeable are situations
Understanding: ability to contextualise knowledge	Problem-solving: how complex are the tasks to be addressed at a particular level	Cooperation and responsibility: extent to which candidate takes responsibility for own and others' work
	Communication: with whom, at what level of complexity, by which means	Learning: extent to which candidate takes responsibility for own learning and competence development

The discussion on the referencing of the NKR to the EQF has drawn attention to some issues. First, discussion between the Nordic countries on the levelling of lower secondary education has caused concern. For the moment it is likely that Finland and Sweden will refer these qualifications to level EQF 3, while Denmark has already made its reference of these qualifications to EQF level 2. This would signal a difference in level of learning outcomes which is considered out of tune with realities. It is not currently clear how Norway will refer level 2 qualifications in NKR to the EQF. Second, the placing of 'basic competences' at level 3 draws attention to a qualification which so far has received little attention in Norway. High drop-out rates from upper secondary education, and in particular from the vocational strand, points to the potentially important role of recognising partial completion at this level. Third, placing two year post-secondary VET qualifications at level 5 and the two year higher education at level 6 has caused controversy. Some stakeholders see this as reflecting a traditional view on the difference between vocational and academic qualifications, not on a balanced comparison of learning outcomes.

There is broad consensus in Norway on the relevance of the learning outcomes approach. *Kunnskapsløftet*, a wide-ranging reform started in 2004 and implemented in 2006, has been of particular significance and implied a comprehensive redefinition and rewriting of curricula objectives at all levels of basic education and training (i.e. primary and secondary education and training, years 1-13). Finding its main expression in a national core-curriculum, addressing all levels of education and training, the learning outcomes approach has started to influence assessment and evaluation forms, in particular in VET. An important reason for using learning outcomes is to encourage the 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.

Adopting the qualifications framework for higher education has also triggered extensive revision of study programmes in higher education, aiming to introduce and apply the learning

outcomes principle in all institutions and programmes. Post-secondary education and training (*fagskole*) have not so far applied the learning outcomes principle in the description of their programmes. The NKR developments are now directly influencing this and the proposal for learning outcomes descriptors for level 5 can be seen as an important starting point for this process. The priority given to validating non-formal and informal learning has also increased awareness of the potential of the learning outcomes approach. It is difficult to judge to what extent the learning outcomes perspective is influencing pedagogical approaches and learning methods.

Links to other instruments and policies

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (*Dokumentasjon av Realkompetanse*) has been on the Norwegian political agenda since the 1990s. All the most important acts on education and training, for primary, upper secondary and higher education and training, stipulate the right of individuals to have their 'real experiences' documented and validated. Existing curricula for lower and upper secondary education and study programmes in higher education are used as references for validation, so the shift towards learning outcomes will influence the way validation is carried out. The NKR proposal lists five areas where it will influence validation:

- introduction of learning outcomes as the underpinning principle for all qualifications;
- increased transparency of qualification levels;
- development of more fit-for-purpose methods, supporting more valid and reliable validation;
- more consistent conceptual basis;
- general shift of attention towards learning outcomes.

Credit transfer by the ECTS is already used to some extent in higher education. Though there is involvement in testing ECVET, the final position has yet to be clarified and there is no explicit link established between the NKR and this initiative.

Referencing to the EQF

Norway expects to finalise referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA in late spring 2013.

Information sources

Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) acts as EQF NCP.
<http://www.nokut.no/en/NOKUT-Knowledge/The-Norwegian-educational-system/The-Norwegian-qualifications-framework/> [accessed 12.12.2012].
<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kd/tema/livslang-laring/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk.html?id=601327> [accessed 12.12.2012].