

European Inventory on NQF 2012

SWEDEN

Introduction

A formal decision of the Swedish government adopting a comprehensive Swedish national qualifications framework (SEQF) is expected during the first half of 2013, possibly in the form of a *Förordning* (decree). A report on the referencing of the SEQF to the EQF will be presented to the EQF Advisory Group in spring 2013. Formal adoption means that the SEQF now is moving into an early operational stage, building on the extensive work carried out since 2009. A decision has been made to carry out separate self-certification of the Swedish higher education system to the European higher education area.

Main policy objectives

The December 2009 decision to initiate work on a comprehensive NQF was primarily presented as a way to aid referencing to the EQF; the framework should make it easier for individuals and employers to compare Swedish qualifications with those in other EU Member States. While this objective still stands, later developments show that the NQF is now increasingly playing a role at national level, in particular by addressing the linkages between formal education and training and the learning taking place in non-formal and informal contexts. This 'opening up' of the framework is visible in the following areas:

Going beyond traditional education and training

The NQF proposal goes beyond existing practices by including qualifications offered by public bodies outside the education and training sector, for example police and customs services. While offering the obvious added value of transparency, the setting up of the NQF provides a new platform for systematic cooperation between all public bodies involved in education and training.

Going beyond the public system

The aim to develop an inclusive framework open to qualifications awarded outside the public system – in particular in the adult/popular education sector and in the labour market – is emphasised in the original 2009 proposal. This focus on the inclusive character of the framework responds to particular features of Swedish education and training. First, the role of adult and popular education is generally very strong, largely explaining why Sweden consistently scores high in all international comparisons on adult and lifelong learning. These courses are offered by a wide range of stakeholders and institutions, both public and private; their link to the ordinary public system is not always fully transparent and clear. An inclusive framework could increase overall transparency of Swedish qualifications and clarify options

for progress and transfer. Second, a very important part of vocational education and training is carried out by enterprises and sectors. While upper secondary education (*Gymnasieskolan*) offers a full range of (three-year) vocational courses, acquiring a full qualification (enabling someone to practise a vocation), will sometimes require additional training and certification at work. This extensive system of labour market based education and training is diverse and in some cases difficult to overview. Linking this 'non-formal' sector to the NQF is seen as crucial for increasing overall transparency. A first outline on how to manage this 'opening up' of the framework was developed during 2011. This proposal suggests establishing a National Council for Qualifications to act as the 'gatekeeper' of the NQF. The Council – involving all relevant stakeholders – would make sure that qualifications aspiring to be included in the framework meet nationally established quality criteria and requirements. Separate work aiming at the development of quality criteria for inclusion was launched in 2012 and a final proposal was presented on 16 November. These criteria will specify how to apply the learning outcomes approach when describing and levelling qualifications, and indicate requirements on quality assurance and transparency to the awarding institution.

Opening up levels 6 to 8 to non-academic qualifications

The NQF proposal presented to the government in October 2010 states that all eight levels of the NQF – including levels 6 to 8 – should be open to all types of qualifications, academic and non-academic. Not only is this seen as being in line with the spirit of EQF, it also reflects the de facto existence of high level qualifications awarded outside universities and academic institutions. This proposal has been received differently by different stakeholders. In a consultation carried out in spring 2011 (200 stakeholders addressed, 60 responses received) reactions could be divided into two main groups. Most universities and academic institutions were in favour of restricting levels 6 to 8 to qualifications covered by the Bologna process. Most public authorities, social partners and regional bodies, however, were in favour of opening these levels to all types of qualifications. The main employer organisation (Svensk Näringsliv) states the overall legitimacy of the framework would suffer ('be lost') if levels 6 to 8 were to be reserved for the university sector. A report summarising the feedback from the consultation was presented to the government in June 2011 (*Återrapportering av regeringsuppdrag*, 2011) ⁽¹⁾ and recommends levels 6 to 8 to be kept open to all types of qualifications. The report acknowledges – in line with the comments from several universities – that an opening of levels 6 to 8 requires robust and visible quality assurance mechanisms making sure that the overall level of Swedish higher education is not negatively affected. The quality criteria currently being developed for inclusion of qualifications into the framework (see above, expected November 2012) will provide a basis for developing practical solutions. It will be up to the government to decide on a final solution, reflecting the divergent opinions expressed through the consultation.

⁽¹⁾ *Avseende en nationell referensram för kvalifikationer i Sverige.*
http://www.eqfinfo.se/Documents/EQF/%c3%85terrapportering/yh_aterrapportering_nqf_1105.pdf
[accessed 5.12.2012].

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The Ministry of Education and Research has overall responsibility for work on the NQF and referencing to the EQF. The national agency for higher vocational education (*Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan*, YH) has been given the mandate to coordinate the development of the framework and is also (as of 1st July 2009) functioning as the Swedish national coordination point for EQF. A number of expert and working groups were formally established following the December 2009 decision:

- a national advisory board has been chaired by YH and consists of representatives of the national agency for education (*Skolverket*), the national agency for higher education (*Högskolverket*), the employers federation, regional authorities, main trade union associations and the public employment services;
- a national reference group consisting of organisations and agencies forming part of public education and training, or closely associated to it. Participants in this group are, among others, the Swedish University Association, the Swedish Student Association and the Swedish Association for Popular Education (*Folkbildning*);
- a number of project groups have been working on particular aspects of the framework and its implementation. In 2011 and 2012, working groups were set up to consider how to open up the framework to external qualifications; how to use level 6 to 8 of the framework; and how to include public qualifications awarded outside the education sector;
- public consultations were carried out in both 2010 and 2011. Approximately 50 organisations and authorities responded to the outline of the framework submitted for consultation in June 2010. Most responses were positive and saw the proposal as a good basis for further development. Two saw no need for the framework. A slightly higher number of stakeholders responded to the 2011 consultation focusing on levels 6 to 8 of the framework (see above). A number of national conferences and events have also been organised.

Development of the SEQF since 2009 has involved a broad group of stakeholders, from education and training and the labour market. This reflects the objective of the Ministry to open up the framework to qualifications offered outside the public sector. The discussion on the opening up of levels 6 to 8 to non-academic qualifications has also contributed to raising interest in the proposal.

While still at a stage of development, interest in the framework is growing and some stakeholders have used it as a reference for their work. This is exemplified by the sports-sector (*Svenska Riksidrottsförbundet*) where the NQF is seen as an instrument for better structuring existing education and training offers. Another example is provided by the 26 institutions responsible for the qualifications of teachers and trainers in VET which have used the NQF as an instrument to identify available pathways into teacher-training and to indicate minimum requirements as regards prior learning and qualifications. A third example is provided by the construction sector, where the framework is being used to indicate alternative progression routes for those wanting to qualify as construction site managers. This approach shows that the traditional higher education pathway (civil engineer) is not the

only possible alternative; several combinations of work experience and formal education (both upper secondary and post-secondary VET) are possible.

A first proposal for a qualifications framework for higher education (in relation to the EHEA) was presented in June 2007. While this work is integrated in the 2010 proposal for an NQF for lifelong learning, a decision has been made to carry out separate self-certification to EHEA.

This decision, and the reasons for it, is not discussed in the proposals on the Swedish NQF presented to the government in 2010 and 2011. While the character of levels 6 to 8 in the NQF is extensively discussed, future interaction between the Swedish qualifications framework for higher education and the NQF for lifelong learning is not addressed explicitly, apart from the general decision, in line with EQF, that academic qualifications will be placed automatically at levels 6 to 8. The consultation carried out in spring 2011 on the opening up of levels 6 to 8 show that there are differences in opinion between the (academic) higher education sector and others involved in developing the NQF. Universities seem to fear that the creation of a comprehensive NQF may come to threaten the overall quality and status of Swedish higher education. It may be assumed that these concerns have influenced the decision to go ahead with a separate self-certification of higher education.

A particular feature of the Swedish process is the central role attributed to YH, the national agency for higher vocational education, in coordinating the development of the NQF. The national agency was set up as late as 2009 with the responsibility of administering what is a new strand of Swedish higher education and training. Providing high level education and training directly relevant to the labour market, *Yrkeshögskolan* has attracted a lot of interest both among individuals and employers. Offering an alternative to the traditional university sector, for example by combining theoretically and practically oriented learning, the new institutions can be seen as complementing existing education and training provisions and qualifications.

This means that coordination of framework developments is carried out by an institution with a clear position on the role of non-academic qualifications at levels 6 to 8. This is a challenging position as the neutrality of the authority may be questioned.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The SEQF is based on an eight-level structure where each level is described through knowledge (*kunskap*), skills (*färdigheter*) and competence (*kompetens*). The explicit objective has been to develop a set of descriptors as closely aligned with the EQF as possible. While the influence of the original EQF descriptors is apparent, the level of detail has been increased. The difference from the EQF can be seen with 'competence' which is defined as the ability to take responsibility, to decide and act independently and to cooperate; the EQF speaks about taking responsibility and acting independently.

The learning outcomes perspective is an important and mostly implemented feature of Swedish education and training. At political level the learning outcomes approach is closely linked to the 'objective-based governance' in use since the early 1990s. While the term

learning outcomes is not commonly used (the term 'knowledge objectives' is used for compulsory education), the principles behind it are well known and accepted. The core curricula for compulsory education have recently been revised, further strengthening and refining the learning outcomes-based approach.

Universities follow national regulations on examinations, requiring the use of learning outcomes, though how these learning outcomes are translated by individual institution varies. These are autonomous institutions where national authorities have less direct influence. The Bologna process has been influential, as have a number of local initiatives.

A particular challenge faced is the extent to which the learning outcomes perspective is influencing assessment practices. Professionals may have problems seeing that assessment methods and criteria have to relate directly to the objectives expressed in the curricula. This is a continuing process illustrating the long-term challenge involved in the shift to learning outcomes.

Links to other tools and policies

The development of the SEQF is seen as an opportunity to promote the work on validating non-formal and informal learning. While progress can be observed (European Commission et al., 2010, Sweden) ⁽²⁾, not least reflecting the extensive use of learning outcomes, it is too early to speak of a fully integrated national system for validation. The challenge is being addressed in two main ways. First, the official aim is to include the learning taking place in non-formal settings (in enterprises, adult and popular education) in the new NQF. National quality criteria have to be developed for this purpose, making sure that the outcomes of education and training meet agreed quality standards. Second, the NQF is also expected to support validation of individual learning outcomes. The 2010 NQF proposal gives general support to strengthening validation arrangements in Sweden, aided by the NQF, but refers to separate development processes taking place in this area. A set of quality criteria for validation were published in 2012: while the formal status of these criteria and their subsequent implementation at national level is somewhat uncertain, this shows that progress is being made in this field.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF will, given the adoption of the SEQF by the government in early 2013, take place spring 2013. Some concern is expressed as regard the placing of the final certificate from primary and (lower) secondary education. An original analysis (based exclusively on a technical analysis of learning outcomes) carried out by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket), placed primary and (lower) secondary education at EQF level 2. This was changed to level 3 in a report to the government, reflecting an analysis of primary

⁽²⁾ *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2010: country report: Sweden.* <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77476.pdf> [accessed 5.12.2012].

and (lower) secondary education curricula. This change has been intensively discussed, including in the four other Nordic countries, indicating different interpretations of the application of the learning outcomes principle for referencing.

Upper secondary education (*Gymnasieskolan*), both general and vocationally oriented, is suggested to be placed at level 4. In line with the proposal to open levels 6 to 8 to all qualifications, academic and non-academic, one type of advanced vocational education (*Kvalificerad yrkeshögskoleexamen*) is placed at level 6.

Important lessons and the way forward

Given that only three years will have passed since the formal go-ahead was given by the government to start development of the SEQF, the process has been rapid. Compared to other countries, Sweden has, from the start, emphasised the need to open up to non-formal education and training and make it possible to establish links to the diverse and extensive field of continuing and popular education and training run by the private sector and non-governmental organisations. The overall success of the framework will partly depend on the extent to which the framework is seen as relevant to stakeholders outside formal, initial education and training.

The Swedish NQF still has some way to go as a platform for cooperation. While the involvement of stakeholders has been systematic and extensive, the continued separate qualifications framework for higher education – and the separate self-certification of this to the QF-EHEA – points to the need for closer dialogue between the university sector and the remaining parts of education and training.

Dialogue between higher education and the remaining parts of education and training is important to address another important objective set for the SEQF, the opening up of levels 6 to 8 to all types of qualification, including those awarded outside the traditional University sector. While the social partner organisations express clear support for this (for example the Confederation of Swedish Employers), the attitude of higher education is more mixed and the final solution will depend on government decision. This decision will eventually influence the extent to which the SEQF is seen as relevant outside the existing, public system for initial education and training.

Main sources of information

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is designated as NCP <http://www.yhmyndigheten.se/hem/higher-vocational-education--hve/> [accessed 12.3.2013].